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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

JULY, 1967 VOL. 3, NO. 6

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E NOVEL

THE ELECTRONIC FRANKENSTEIN AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Sinister, dark, the Gobi holds close its secrets of life—and sudden death—as Solo and Illya seek to track down THRUSH's latest, most lethal weapon, a robot which reads man's private, most inner thoughts and then destroys them horribly—without a trace!

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CYLVIA KLEINMAN
Editorial Director

HOLMES TAYLOR
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THE ELECTRONIC FRANKENSTEIN AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Silent, malevolent, the Gobi guarded its grim secret, as Solo and Illya fought against time and THRUSH to find the demon which could read men's very thoughts—and kill without a trace!

PROLOGUE—THE EXECUTIONERS

THE TWO U.N.C.L.E. agents were wearing fleece-lined greatcoats, fur mittens and heavy leather boots. But only bulky spacesuits could have insulated them against the icy wind that was blowing cold upon them from a cold winter sea, chilling them to the bone.

It came sweeping up out of the gray Atlantic in gusts of almost hurricane force, raising flurries of snow and making the bleak inhospitality of the Newfoundland Banks in midwinter very hard to endure.

They were large, sturdily built men. But the gigantic rock structures which ran parallel with the headland on its landward side made them seem grotesquely out of proportion in this terrain so rugged it would have

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THE NEW COMPLETE "U.N.C.L.E." NOVEL

STARRING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

dwarfed a twelve-foot giant.

They both wore upon their left wrists THRUSH cell identification bracelets bearing initials which their real names—Bruce Huntley and Walter Rivers—completely belied. And they both knew that if a whisper of that deception came to the ears of THRUSH they would be in the deadliest kind of danger.

A few feet from where they were standing, a narrow path descended the cliff wall to a mile-wide stretch of beach, strewn with the wreckage of an Atlantic gale that had reached its peak two days earlier and hadn't quite blown itself out.

Several large brown rats with wetly glistening coats had made their home amidst the wreckage carried shoreward by an earlier storm and were running back and forth across the sand, exploring the new wreckage with starved eagerness.

Huntley was the first to break the silence. They were miles from the nearest human habitation. But two weeks of constant undercover vigilance inside the stone walls of a THRUSH project had made him super-cautious and he kept his voice lowered from force of habit, speaking just loud enough to make himself heard above the crash of the waves.

"We should be seeing the submarine any minute now," he said. "It would be a mistake to start worrying before the commander comes ashore. What makes you think they've even begun to suspect us?"

Rivers lowered the powerful binocular telescope he had been keeping steadily trained on the sea, and stared at his companion for an instant before replying.

"I don't know, exactly," he said. "It would be misleading to call it a hunch; it's far too nebulous. It's just that—well, when everything goes too well it's hard to shake off the feeling that you may be walking into a trap."

"I've had that feeling myself at times," Huntley confessed. "But you can't say we haven't taken every precaution. No messages exchanged, even in code. No attempt to communicate with New York. We've never allowed ourselves to forget there could be—and probably are—electronic eavesdropping devices behind every wall and corridor turn throughout the entire project."

The gusts of wind that were sweeping the headland seemed suddenly to increase in violence. Only a thin coating of snow covered the frozen soil at the cliff's edge, and no more snow was descending. But there were thin splinters of sleet in the air, as cheek-stinging as chilblains.

Huntley raised his voice as he went on, no longer giving a thought to the caution which their distance from the THRUSH project had made wholly unnecessary.

"We breathe and our every bronchial murmur becomes a matter of record. We scrawl a few words on a slip of paper—which we've been careful not to do, of course—and an invisible photocell scanning device reproduces the message, along with our palm prints."

"You don't have to blueprint it for me," Rivers said. "The reports we've been getting concerning THRUSH's progress in protective bugging equipment in recent months has given Waverley some bad moments. They've matched us device for device, probably because we've been pressing them so hard we've given them no choice. But granting all that, what does just recognizing the danger prove? We've stayed alert to it, sure. But one small slip—"

"I can't believe we've made any," Huntley said with conviction. "We've followed instructions too scrupulously. Touch nothing, investigate nothing beyond what we came here to find out. They would never have entrusted us with a mission as important as this if they had the remotest suspicion we're U.N.C.L.E. undercover operatives."

The waves had been making a hollow, drumming sound as they crashed against the cliff wall. The two herring gulls had seemed completely unaffected by the sound. But suddenly a kind of panic came upon them, and they went flapping seaward, as if a different kind of sound, inaudible to human ears, had alerted them to danger and made the shoreline seem unsafe.

Huntley stared at them in puzzlement as their mad, erratic flight carried them a mile from shore, then continued with his attempt to diminish his companion's entirely human forebodings.

"If they suspected us I'm quite sure we'd know by now," he said, as if he felt the point needed to be stressed. "You can usually tell when you're under surveillance."

"But not always," Rivers said.

Huntley tightened his lips, and looked at the other sharply. "Something is bugging you," he said. "Why don't you get it off your chest?"

"All right, I will," Rivers said. "Consider first what we've found out. In two or three more days, at most, THRUSH will have ready a twenty-pound detonating device that can destroy all underwater life within a radius of fifty or sixty

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

miles. It's the deadliest midget torpedo-like weapon ever developed."

He paused an instant to stare down at the rats on the beach far below. "They think we're just bench-level technicians," he went on, staring seaward again. "Doesn't it seem strange to you that we should have been given the assignment of contacting the submarine that's to give the denator a test run? It's more of a job for a top-echelon operative."

Huntley shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "You're forgetting that THRUSH trusts no one. Not even a sub commander is exempt. And they want a simple, honest, first-hand report, precisely the kind of report two bench-level technicians would be most likely to return with. It's a kind of security check. It would take an hour to transmit what we're delivering into his hands on microfilm, and they know exactly how proficient U.N.C.L.E. is in cracking messages in code."

"I hope you're right," Rivers said. "For all we know the commander may have been warned to watch us like a hawk. That could be the key as to why we're here. They may be hoping we'll do or say something that will confirm what they've begun to suspect."

"If they were even slightly suspicious they'd be making plans for our burial," Huntley said. "You don't send a man on an eight-mile journey to blow him apart when you can dispose of him much more efficiently on a twenty-foot target range."

"But suppose they're not quite sure. Suppose—"

"There would be simpler ways of making sure than sending us on a mission this vital," Huntley said. "They'd never choose such a complicated, round-about way of handling it on the off-chance we may make some slip—"

Suddenly Rivers stiffened. He lowered his binoculars for an instant, inspected the twin lenses quickly to make sure they were not misted over, and returned the instrument to his eyes. For a full minute he continued to stare seaward, his face set in harsh lines. Then his hand went out and fastened on Huntley's arm.

"Follow that deep-channel gray streak to where it turns almost black," he said. "The periscope's just a little to the left of a patch of choppy waves. It's moving fast."

Huntley nodded and re-aligned his binoculars without saying a word. His features remained impassive. But his posture matched that of Rivers in its stock-still alertness.

No further word was spoken until Rivers, as if irked by the other's silence, asked abruptly: "Don't you see it? It should be easy enough to make out. It's almost stationary now and the sea around it is breaking into foam."

"Yes, I see it," Huntley said. "But I thought for a minute it might be a shark. A fin cutting through the water would have pretty much the same look—"

"That wouldn't be so wide of the mark," Rivers said. "In about three more minutes we'll be seeing the gray dorsal fins of an all-metal killer shark that's probably more native to these waters than THRUSH would like anyone—least of all, U.N.C.L.E.—to suspect."

"How many men do you suppose they'll put ashore?" the other asked. "Two—a half-dozen? There's very little likelihood that the commander will arrive on the beach alone."

He stopped speaking abruptly, the rigidity of his posture becoming more pronounced again. The submarine was emerging into view amidst a white swirl of foam. Not even the dull overcast could dim the gleam of a conning tower awash with spray as it continued to surface, swaying and rocking a little.

In utter silence the two men on the headland watched the hatch arise and several crew members leap out. They watched a hurrying to and fro, and the putting off from the long gray undersea craft of a small boat which contained four men, wearing what looked like THRUSH uniforms of officer rank.

FIVE MINUTES later the boat was drawing up at the beach and in all that time neither Huntley nor Rivers had exchanged a word, so intent had they been on watching a possible threat to their very survival materializing out of the sea.

"Well, this is it," Huntley said, his voice so sharply decisive it seemed to shatter the stillness like a pistol shot. "We may as well meet them on the beach."

Descending the narrow cliffside path against the fierce gusts of wind took them a full minute. The four officers had just finished beaching the boat when they reached the frozen sand, and only one of them had started to move cliffward.

He was a tall, gaunt man with a heavily lined face and he walked with a slight stoop and a faint suggestion of weariness. But there was something authoritative in his darkly gleaming eyes and the stern set of his features that left Huntley and Rivers in little doubt as to his command status.

The instant he saw Huntley and Rivers he raised his right arm in a gesture of recognition. It was not a greeting. There was no change of expression on his face, nothing to suggest that he was pleased to see them, or even that their appearance on the beach had lifted a small burden from his shoulders by making a search for them unnecessary.

He turned and gestured toward the other three officers and stood waiting for them to join him without advancing further.

Then, walking four abreast, the men from the sea approached Huntley and Rivers and halted directly in front of them.

The commander was wearing steel-rimmed spectacles and there was a hard glint in his pupils which the thick lenses seemed to magnify. Even at a distance of seven feet the coldness of his gaze was unmistakable.

"I am Commander Ulrich," he said. "And these gentlemen are my senior and junior officers. You are Thomas Drake and Melvin Kendall?"

The use of their THRUSH cell names, which corresponded with the initials on their identity bracelet, would not have remotely suggested that their disguise had been penetrated if Commander Ulrich's voice had not been tinged with mockery. The mockery was as pronounced as the coldness of his gaze, and it caused Huntley to hesitate a moment before replying.

Rivers had been content simply to nod, but a look of relief came into his eyes when Huntley answered the question with surprising firmness.

"Yes," he said. "We have some microfilm instructions to turn over to you. We were told—"

"What were you told, precisely?" Ulrich asked, a deceptive mildness coming into his voice.

"That the submarine would surface and you would come ashore between two and two-thirty. We were instructed to return to the project if you did not arrive by three, at the latest."

"Excellent," Commander Ulrich said. "You are very good at obeying orders—up to a point. But then you committed an unforgivable blunder. You talked about the precautions you'd taken to avoid exposure. I can quote your exact words, spoken less than twenty minutes ago: 'We've taken every precaution. No messages exchanged, even in code. No attempt to communicate with New York.'

"A great deal more, of course. But need I repeat everything you said? It would only delay your execution by a few minutes and for a condemned man a few minutes can mean an eternity of torment. I'm sure you would not wish to delay what has become inevitable."

Huntley and Rivers had both taken a quick step backwards, pallor overspreading their features. It was as if so strong a feeling of unreality had come upon them that speech had become impossible, for when their lips opened and closed the silence which had followed the commander's accusation remained unbroken.

"I know," Ulrich said, his voice once more tinged with derision. "It seems unbelievable, doesn't it? We were under the sea and you were standing on the cliff overheard, seven miles from the project. No possibility of being overheard, eh? Well—you were. And not by hu-

man ears until we picked up the warning."

His voice thickened, became choked with sudden rage. "To think that THRUSH had not the faintest suspicion that you might be U.N.C.L.E. agents! The unit's surveillance was just a precaution. If you had remained silent—"

Commander Ulrich turned abruptly and made a quick gesture with his right hand. The three other officers drew their weapons so swiftly that the long-muzzled pistols in their hands were leveled and aimed before the two U.N.C.L.E. agents could take another step backwards.

Leaping backwards or aside could not have saved them and Huntley seemed to realize that an instant before the first blast came, for there swept into his eyes a look of resignation terrible in its bleak hopelessness.

He straightened nevertheless, facing death with his shoulders squared, and although the two bullets that tore through his chest sent him spinning back toward the cliff wall, he did not slump until he struck a jagged edge of rock with his arms outflung.

Why the three officers did not fire simultaneously, blasting away at both men until they both dropped remained their own secret. But it was not too difficult to fathom. Efficiency in an execution could be impaired that way. Bullet riddled bodies had a way of recoiling and rebounding and random firing, even at almost pointblank range, could leave an uncertainty in the mind until the smoke cleared.

That unconscious preference for accuracy and neatness in killing gave Rivers a few more minutes of life. Before the gun in the hand of the officer on Commander Ulrich's right came level with his head he flung himself face downward in the sand, jerking himself backwards just as quickly without raising his head.

The gun that had been aimed at his head wavered a little as the officer lowered it and before he could bring it into alignment again with so flattened a target River's hand had whipped under his greatcoat and emerged with a tiny explosive pellet the size of a fountain pen.

He hurled it straight at the four men from the sea and the target he might have made was obliterated by the smoke from a blast that lighted up the entire beach, completely dispelling the gray overcast.

When the smoke cleared Commander Ulrich was lying stretched out at full length on a patch of blood-reddened sand, his head blown off. The officer who hadn't succeeded in exploding his gun at all was swaying back and forth on his knees, his hands clutching his stomach as if the flood of red that was oozing between his fingers was running a race with the glaze that

was creeping across his eyes, and winning at a terrible cost in pain.

The third officer had turned and was hobbling toward the surfline and the beached boat, the entire back of his head so charred by the blast that it seemed incredible that he could hobble at all.

But the fourth officer had been injured only slightly, and his freakish luck in having escaped the full force of the blast had brought a look of grim exultation into his eyes. He stood very still, taking careful aim at Rivers as he arose to his full height and Rivers was too shaken by the concussion which had followed the blast to realize how great was his peril until the gun went off.

The bullet ripped the flesh of his right shoulder, leaving a jagged gash. The pain was agonizing for an instant. But it did not prevent him from swinging about and running with his shoulders lowered toward the cliff wall, zigzagging a little to make it less likely that the bullets he knew would follow quickly to find lodgment in his brain or heart.

He was a third of the way up the cliff wall when the narrow path in front of him erupted in a cloud of dust and the roar of the pursuing officer's gun made his ears ring. But the second shot was a clean miss, and he was at the top of the cliff before the third blast came.

He looked down and saw the long-muzzled pistol flame an instant before something that felt like a solid wall of metal struck him full in the chest.

He took a tottering step forward, bent double and went spinning over the edge of the cliff, his body turning over and over in the air until it landed with a crash on below.

The THRUSH officer whose role of executioner had been successfully completed stood for an instant twenty feet from the summit of the cliff, and returned his still smoking pistol to its holster beneath his right shoulder, a cold smile playing over his distorted features.

Then he descended the path to the beach, stood for a moment staring down at the crumpled body of Huntley and lingered for a moment longer on the crushed and battered remains of the U.N.C.L.E. agent his own accuracy of aim had brought low.

The officer who had gone hobbling toward the boat had somehow managed to draw it out into the surf and was standing knee-deep in swirling foam, holding fast to the rail and swaying like a drunken man.

The face of the successful executioner convulsed with what could only have been rage. "Coward, simpleton, fool," he muttered, between clenched teeth. "He leaves it all to me and getting what's left of the commander into that boat is

not going to be easy. If he lets go of the rail—"

There were two dead THRUSH officers on the beach now. But the one who had tried in vain to stem the flow of blood that had widened about him like a rock pool fringed with scarlet sea anemones he ignored, as if for a responsible THRUSH officer to get himself killed, however unavoidably, made him contemptible in a successful executioner's eyes.

That the commander was equally an object of contempt was evident in the rough way he was lifted up, dragged across the beach and tumbled, minus his head, into the swaying boat's stern.

A moment later the boat was moving out across the sea toward the waiting THRUSH submarine.

ONE

NEW YORK BRIEFING

NAPOLEON SOLO and Illya Kuryakin were frowning heavily when they walked into the big, brightly lighted room crowded with electronic equipment where the New York Control Unit of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement conducted its operations.

The quiet brownstone on the East Side of New York, a short distance from the East River, possessed an invaluable defensive protection in just the constant ebb and

flow of Manhattan's daily life in eddies around it.

Passing cars, a little old lady stopping to chat with a neighbor, a diplomat with a brief case hurrying in the direction of the United Nations Building a few blocks away were all assets. Who would suspect that behind so unpretentious a false front one of the most powerful crime-fighting organizations on earth functioned around the clock, receiving communications and issuing orders global in scope?

Sometimes it worried Solo just a little, if only because so vast a complex of assembled technology, and the activities of so many men of exceptional brilliance might lead to over-confidence and a prematurely-timed confrontation with THRUSH in a gigantic struggle that could have world-destroying consequences.

Someday such a risk might have to be taken, the fateful pawn tossed down in bold challenge, for THRUSH could not be allowed to wreck civilization by abandoning

all concern for its own survival in its mad grasp for power.

So far THRUSH had come close to waging such a struggle, for many of the battles it had lost to U.N.C.L.E. in the past had been potentially world-destructive. But always that final stage of suicidal madness had been averted, and THRUSH had drawn back from a gamble with destiny in which there could be no victor. Like some great beast, snarling and grievously wounded, it had retreated into jungle shadows to recoup its strength for another try.

Napoleon Solo had supreme confidence in the sobriety and good sense of the organization he served as Chief Enforcement Officer, Section II. He had supreme confidence as well in the decisions of Alexander Waverly, the director of U.N.C.L.E.'s New York headquarters.

But now, as he strode into the presence of that bushy-browed, tweedily attired and remarkably self-possessed man of just past middle-age, he was sharing Illya Kuryakin's vexation concerning something that had happened to them the night before.

It was a minor vexation and they did not think that it would interest Waverly. But somehow they found that shrugging it off in completely casual fashion was proving difficult. It concerned a dinner date with a blonde and a brunette who had behaved outrageously.

First the blonde had seemed more drawn to Solo and had then decided that she liked Kuryakin better, and the brunette had abandoned Illya in favor of Solo. That would have been all right, because the two young ladies had been almost equally attractive. But later, on leaving the restaurant, they had both changed their minds again.

"There's something I guess we just have to accept," Solo was saying. "It's hard for a woman to stay attached to just one man when an evening is long and complicated and there are unusual men on hand to make a choice difficult."

"You're probably right. We really ought to forget it." Illya was attempting to smile, but he looked the opposite of happy.

Before they could carry the conversation further they had passed through the door of the brightly lighted research facility and electronic communications room and Waverly was coming forward to greet them.

There were those who thought of Waverly as sedate and scholarly and others who saw him as "a tough old bird" with a wrinkle-seamed face who could probably hold his own with a much younger man in hand-to-hand combat. Few men, indeed, saw precisely the same Waverly, for his expression alone could change with great rapidity, particularly when he was under the stress of strong emotion.

That he was under such stress now was instantly apparent to both Napoleon Solo and Kuryakin. But though his eyes glittered with excitement nothing could completely shatter the control which he had over his emotions.

"There's something I want you to see," he said. "We can talk afterwards. Sit down over there and make yourselves comfortable. You won't stay relaxed for long, I can promise you."

He gestured toward a row of five metal-backed chairs facing a large unlighted screen, a few feet in front of a massive projection instrument, which was connected with a wall socket by ten feet of cable-like wiring as thick as a man's wrist.

Solo walked to the five chairs and sat down on the one nearest the door. Illya hesitated an instant, as if were about to ask Mr. Waverly a question.

"Just be seated please, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said, putting an end to Illya's indecision. He choose the chair next to Solo, crossed his legs and waited, a puzzled frown on his face.

Waverly was seldom quite so abrupt, and it suggested to both men that the strain under which he appeared to be laboring was indeed unusual.

He dug a pipe with a bulldog bowl from his pocket, and took his time in filling it with tobacco and lighting it. Then he strode to the projector and fussed with the instrument for a moment, as if just turning it on was proving more of an ordeal than he had anticipated and he wished to postpone it as long as possible.

"The light switch, Mr Solo," he said. "Take care of it, please. The room must be in darkness."

Solo nodded and without getting up he leaned sideways and pressed a button that plunged the room in total darkness. There was a faint click, and the screen lighted up before the darkness could become oppressive.

"What you are about to see," Waverly said, "is a re-run of an audio-visual telecast picked up from God knows what freakish source by one of our range-finding transmission circuits. A code-breaking circuit, although this particular telecast is not in code, visually or otherwise. Apparently THRUSH did not think it could be picked up. If they had, you can be sure it would have come through scrambled."

"But why should THRUSH think that?" Solo asked. "Was it different from an ordinary telecast?"

"In some respects it was," Waverly said. "The frequencies are unusual, although not beyond the range of our highly specialized pickup circuit. Also—and this is most important—we've determined, from painstaking angle-analysis, that it could not have been made by a recording instrumnet in the immediate vicinity of what you

are about to see taking place on the screen. It could only have been made from a very great distance."

"You mean—by a telescopic lens and sound apparatus?"

"Perhaps. But even that seems to be ruled out, in a way, by other peculiarities revealed by the analysis. It is a most baffling telecast. It may not have even been transmitted by THRUSH from the site of the recording to the Newfoundland project for purposes of documentation. It's as if some invisible recording source, such as a photo-sensitized cloud high in the sky had audio-visually picked up and transmitted what was taking place on the beach far below."

"The Newfoundland Project!" Solo said. "I might have guessed it. The long silence of Huntley and Rivers—"

"Huntley's body was found by a trawler two days ago, floating in the sea some thirty miles south of the headland which is the nearest point of land on the map which I've been consulting," said Waverly. "The headland is about eight miles east of the THRUSH project. You are now going to see exactly what took place on that headland. It is a scene of absolute horror."

TWO

THE EAVESDROPPER

THE CLICK which ensued—it was followed by a low humming—seemed to convey more to the two seated U.N.C.L.E. operatives than the fact that Waverly had turned on the projector, for they stiffened to instant alertness. It was as if that small, sharp sound possessed the miraculous power of bringing the gulf between the New York brownstone and the Newfoundland Banks.

There was no flickering, no slightest trace of distortion. The headland and the beach at its base stood out with a startling clarity and seemed to come right into the room, wrapped in what was unmistakably a gray overcast, but an overcast that wasn't pronounced enough to diminish visibility.

Standing rigid by the projector, Waverly paused for an instant to brush lint from his immaculate tweed jacket. His voice, when it came again, was raised half an octave higher.

"As you can see, it's a close view of about eighty feet of beach, with a towering cliff wall in the background. You can see the boulders fringing the shoreline so distinctly you can trace the veins where erosion has produced a kind of splitting. You can also see that Huntley and Rivers are aware of their peril, because the veins on their forehead stand out just as distinctly.

"One of the THRUSH officers will speak in a moment. Listen carefully to what he is saying."

Napoleon Solo leaned more sharply forward in his chair, but

Kuryakin remained absolutely motionless, his posture as rigid as that of Waverly.

The officer had seemingly been speaking previously, for his face had the harsh, accusing look of a man who had been working himself into a rage.

His voice rang out in sudden sharpness, rising above the other sounds from the screen. "You committed a serious blunder. You talked about the precautions you'd taken to avoid exposure. I can quote your exact words, spoken less than twenty minutes ago."

For a full minute the voice droned on, accusation following accusation and making Solo and Illya exchange incredulous glances in stunned, tight-lipped silence. Waverly said not a word.

"I know," the THRUSH officer was saying. "It seems unbelievable, doesn't it? We were under the sea and you were standing on the cliff overhead, seven miles from the Project. No possibility of being overheard, eh? But—you were. And not by human ears—until we picked up the warning."

The THRUSH officer's voice became choked with rage and he spoke a few more words, even more startling in what they seemed to imply. Then he made an abrupt gesture and the three other officers drew long-barreled pistols. One of the pistols roared.

Huntley went spinning backwards to collide with the cliff wall and collapse in a heap at its base. Rivers threw himself flat, recoiled backwards and whipped a tiny, gleaming object from under his greatcoat. Neither Solo or Illya had any doubt as to what the object was.

Rivers hurled the midget grenade at the four THRUSH officers and the screen became a roaring inferno of smoke and flame. When the smoke cleared the accusing officer was lying on the sand with his head blown off, the rest of him a gleaming, scarlet horror. And Rivers had regained his feet and was racing for the cliff wall, with an officer who had survived the blast in furious pursuit.

What followed brought a groan of anguish from a man who had seen more than one U.N.C.L.E. agent fall to his death.

The screen went blank and he said, "Something seems to have interrupted the telecast at this point. There's just one more brief pickup, lasting for less than thirty seconds. Watch not only the boat putting out to sea, but the left hand corner of the screen.

Again the screen filled with light and sound and color. A small boat was moving slowly away from the beach, with one officer at the oars, another lying slumped across the rail. And in the left hand corner of the screen a long gray undersea craft was riding the choppy waves, its decks agleam with spray.

"A THRUSH submarine, beyond

any possibility of doubt," Illya said. "I can just make out the insignia on the conning tower."

All three men remained silent for a full minute after the screen went blank.

Then Waverly said: "There's another telecast I want you to look at, picked up in just as mysterious a way. It's quite brief, as you will see."

Almost instantly the screen grew very bright again, and a completely different kind of landscape came into view. Instead of towering cliffs walls swept by winter gales and a gray expanse of sea there stretched in all directions a level waste of sand, sun-drenched and almost featureless. Far in the distance a few dunes were faintly visible, obscured by a pale violet haze which seemed to hang suspended between the desert and the sky.

In the foreground a tall man wearing tropical shorts and a sun helmet sat on a tripod-shaped metal stool making a sketch with swift strokes on a sheet of paper pinned to a drawing board. He was darkly bearded and sun-bronzed, with hawklike features.

Suddenly he looked up and jumped to his feet with a wild cry, dropping the drawing board and backing away in terror from something which the three men in the darkened room could not see at all.

The something wasn't visible on the screen, and could have been a considerable distance from where the abruptly recoiling man had been sitting.

Just as abruptly the telecast flickered out.

"Watch," Waverly said, sharply. "Another picture is coming. It establishes something of great importance—that what you have just seen is a fragment from some kind of documentary record. It must have been intended to be just that, a televised documentary which THRUSH could hardly fail to find of interest."

When the screen lighted up again the drawing board appeared against a featureless gray background, so greatly enlarged that it almost filled the screen. The sketch which the artist had been making when the board had dropped to the sand was unfinished and extremely crude.

It depicted what looked like a dancing giant in a posture of ceremonial rigidity, as if its movements had become so formalized as that of a Balinese temple dancer. In a vague way it did seem either Balinese or Chinese, for the artist had placed upon its head a kind of tower-shaped turban tapering to a point.

An instant before the screen went dark again a cold, metallic voice spoke a few words: "Gobi—7Y887. Object pickup. Object pickup. Object pickup. Transmission channel T 56 H.

In tight-lipped silence Waverly left the projector, walked across the

room and clicked on the overhead lights. His voice was emotion-charged when he said: "Well, now you've seen both telecasts. John Blakeley has been missing for three weeks. No word from him at all. You recognized him, I'm sure, despite a three weeks' growth of beard."

"Yes, of course," Solo said. "Instantly. He went unshaven close to a month two years ago in the Sahara, when we—"

"He's working alone this time," Waverly said, cutting him short. "And there are parts of the Gobi which are quite different from the Sahara, apparently. That's why we sent him there. Strange lights in the sky, terrified natives and THRUSH in big, capital letters written right across the sky. Invisible to governmental intelligence agencies from here to Singapore perhaps, but not to U.N.C.L.E. We've had too much experience in making that kind of writing visible."

"You filled us in pretty thoroughly about all of that last month," Solo said.

"What I didn't fill you in about, naturally," Waverly said, "was what you've just seen. A clearly established linkage between what happened in Newfoundland and whatever it was that made Blakeley draw that sketch and let it drop to the sand. Both of the telecasts were picked up in the same mysterious way and both apparently are directly related to a kind of eavesdropping that is without precedent in human experience. It is a kind of eavesdropping which could—"

Waverly stopped, rumbled in his pocket for his pipe and got it lighted again before going on. There was a grimly speculative look in his eyes.

"Perhaps we'd better discuss the whole eavesdropping problem for a moment," he said. "Suppose we try to put it into perspective, to relate it to the major problems which U.N.C.L.E. may find itself more and more involved with.

"There are four technological developments which threaten human survival on a worldwide scale. One, the population explosion, depends less on technology in a strict sense than on what medical science has accomplished in overcoming diseases that take a high toll of human life. But we may as well include it.

"Then there's the always present danger of thermonuclear destruction on a global scale and the equally serious threat of chemical and biological warfare on the same scale.

"But the greatest threat of all, perhaps the one most to be feared, is eavesdropping on a global scale. Do you realize what it could mean if there was no privacy left on earth, if everyone was under continuous observation night and day? Civilization would almost certainly come to a complete standstill. No one could even breathe without the certain knowledge that they were being spied upon. Every conversation would be picked up and processed and filed away for future reference. Would anyone care to talk or carry on under such circumstances? The demoralization would be absolute. People would simply give up. Not at first. There would be ruthless tyrants still in the saddle. But eventually the blight would extend even to them."

Waverly puffed slowly on his pipe for a moment, staring at the projector as if he wished, despite what he had just said, that it were an all-seeing eye that could penetrate the walls of every THRUSH cell.

"If THRUSH possessed such a eavesdropping weapon," he went on, "they would not worry too much about how destructive it would ultimately prove. They would think only of how useful it would be to them in achieving world dominance. U.N.C.L.E. would be first in the line of attack. You can be sure of that."

He took another slow puff on his pipe. "That is why I wanted you to look at those telecasts," he said. "The plane will leave tomorrow afternoon at five o'clock. Your first stop will be Tokyo, where you will be briefed as to your exact itinerary. You will be flown to Inner Mongolia and then to the Gobi. The details have not yet been completely worked out. But everything will have been taken care of before you arrive at the Tokyo airport, where you will be met by a most genial gentleman. A pipe smoker, like myself."

THREE

THE WOMAN WHO WAS DRESSED TO KILL

WHEN SOLO AND Kuryakin emerged from the quiet brownstone they had the disturbing feeling that observant eyes were trained upon them. But they could not have said why, for the street was deserted along its entire length except for a parked limousine near the end of the block. The driver wore a chauffeur's uniform and he had descended from the car and was helping its three remaining occupants to descend to the curb.

The first was a young lady very curiously garbed. She wore a long

yellow dress of shimmering silk which descended to her ankles and small golden slippers. Her hair, a lustrous black, was knotted into a double braid and coiled tightly around her head in over-lapping folds. Her skin was of a satiny whiteness, but even from so great a distance they could see that her features were of oriental cast, the eyes almond-shaped, the cheekbones high-arching and prominent. Whether she was beautiful, plain-looking or ugly was hard to determine. But it seemed extremely unlikely that she could be ugly, and the likelihood of her being beautiful Solo put very high.

A tall, gaunt man, also unmistakably an oriental, followed her to the curb and was in turn followed by a frail, birdlike old man who appeared to be the last of the car's occupants, for the chauffeur slammed the rear door shut the instant he reached the sidewalk. The gaunt man was carrying a brown leather attache case and the elderly man—his complexion was more yellowish than that of Mr. Tall—was wearing a beautifully tailored gray herringbone suit and a pearl gray homburg.

"Well, what do you think?" Solo asked, nudging Illya's arm.

"Probably headed for the United Nations," Kuryakin replied. "It's anybody's guess why they stopped off here. Perhaps to have lunch at one of the restaurants around the corner."

"Then why didn't they park directly in front of the restaurant?"

"Parking restrictions would account for that," Illya said, smiling. "We can watch and see where they go, if you like. I've a hunch that if Miss Chin O.Boy happened to be alone you'd follow her right into the restaurant."

"That's nonsense," Solo said. "From this distance I can't even see what she looks like."

"You'd find out quickly enough. Even from here she looks like a stunner to me. With a figure like that you couldn't go so far wrong even if her face was a little on the plain side."

"I don't like it," Solo said abruptly.

"Her face, you mean? But you just said you couldn't see—"

"Come off it, Illya," Solo said, cutting him short. His expression had become serious. "They're coming our way and there's something about this I don't like at all."

"But what, for Pete's sake? They look like United Nations people to me. A diplomatic big gun from Formosa, accompanied by his daughter and a legation secretary or interpreter."

"I don't think they're from Formosa. Or the Chinese mainland, for that matter."

"You still haven't told me precisely what you don't like about it."

"Three things," Solo said. "They drive up and park the instant we walk out. They're not heading for

a restaurant but walking our way and walking quite fast. And I don't like the look on their faces. I can see Miss Chin O.Boy's face quite clearly now and you guessed right about her. She is beautiful, a real stunner. But I think you got her name all wrong. It isn't Miss Chin O.Boy. It's Chin Quickie Deathie."

Illya's handsome Slavic features paled slightly. "You can't believe that! Napoleon, they'd never try it! Not in broad daylight!"

"Speed is of the essence," Solo snapped. "Watch that attache case! I'll keep my eye on the girl!"

"We've just time to get back inside!" Illya said, his eyes darting to the quiet brownstone. "Perhaps we'd better—"

"And make them just suicidally frustrated enough to blow up the entire block before we can warn Waverly? It's unlikely, but it could happen. No, we've got to stay on the target range until it's over."

Illya nodded. "You're right, of course. One advantage, they don't think we suspect them."

Solo silenced him with a gesture. "We move first, but we have about ten more seconds. Tick them off in your mind. *Start now.* In ten more seconds, twelve at most, they'll be within a few feet of us."

Both Solo and Kuryakin knew exactly what to do when the countdown ended. The situation conformed to an *Unusual Attack* briefing which U.N.C.L.E. kept under double lock and key for the benefit of Section II trainees confronted with just such an emergency.

Illya counted slowly, his eyes on the approaching woman in shimmering silk and her two male companions. He appeared to be watching the three with the slightly heightened interest an average New Yorker would have displayed on seeing three turbaned East Indians walking down the avenue.

Far down the street the chauffeur had not moved from beside the car. He was leaning against the hood of the car, reading a newspaper.

SEVEN . . . *eight* . . . *nine.* Was Solo counting too? Illya wondered. He had a way of cheating a little at times when he didn't need to tick off the seconds in his mind to know exactly when to bring his hair-trigger reflexes into play.

The woman was walking between the birdlike little man and the gaunt Chinese near-giant with slightly downcast eyes, as if Solo's admiring stare, while pleasing to her, was making her blush inwardly. They were less than twenty feet away when Illya reached the count of twelve.

The tube which he removed from beneath his right lapel was just a little larger than a fountain pen, an all-metal job with a flaring tip. With quick and absolute accuracy of aim he trained it on the right arm of the tall, gaunt man. It

vibrated slightly and made a faint hissing sound.

He sprinted forward the instant he fired and caught the brief case as it dropped from the gaunt man's completely paralyzed hand.

Illya bent and set the attache case gingerly down on the curb, not unmindful of what the destructive consequences might be if he made the mistake of jarring it. He had sufficient time to do this before turning to see what Solo had accomplished, because the paralysis he'd inflicted on the gaunt man's arm had been preceded by a pain so searing that a cry of agony had gone echoing along the street, to the accompaniment of retreating footsteps.

Not only did the gaunt Chinese go reeling backwards to the opposite curb. He kept right on screaming, as if he feared that his arm had been completely severed at the wrist and his hand was gone forever.

When Illya turned he saw that Solo had grasped the hem of the Chinese woman's long, flowing dress and wound it tightly around her ankles, tightening it until she could not move. He was now engaged in lowering her to the pavement and thumping her from hips to shoulder to make sure she was weaponless.

The small, birdlike man had turned and was racing back along the street toward the limousine, his homburg, caught in a sudden flurry of wind, spinning along the street in the opposite direction.

The shimmeringly attired woman was now lying stretched out at full length on the pavement and Solo was kneeling at her side. His voice rang out sharply. "You made it necessary for me to forget that you are a woman. Stay right where you are, and don't attempt to get up. If you do I'll forget again. You're in serious trouble."

"It is you who are in trouble!" The Chinese woman raised herself slightly, despite Solo's firm grip on her shoulder. Her eyes flashed defiantly as she went on, talking very rapidly.

"The two telecasts everything you thought would remain a secret are known to us. When you sat watching the screen you were under observation. Every word you spoke was recorded. And that surveillance will continue. We are so strong now we can afford to let you know this. Knowing that you are under observation, night and day, will make you more vulnerable."

Her voice rose mockingly. "Yes, a great deal more vulnerable. You will never know—"

Solo did not wait to hear more. He arose, whipped a flat-barreled pistol from under his coat and gestured Illya toward the woman on the pavement.

"Watch her!" he said. "If she tries to get up slap her. You'll have to. It may not be too late to get

to that car before it turns the corner."

Illya shook his head and pointed, and Solo's gaze traveled swiftly down the long street to where the car had been parked. A look of astonishment came into his eyes, and he froze to immobility.

The car was in motion, but it wasn't turning the corner. It was coming straight down the street toward them, zigzagging a little because of the tremendous speed at which it was being driven.

In another instant it was abreast of them. Solo raised his gun as it screeched to a halt and sent two bullets crashing through the windshield. He saw the tall, gaunt man sway, clutch at his chest and sink below the level of the shattered glass.

But that did not prevent the chauffeur from leaping to the street with a pistol twice the length of Solo's in his clasp. He leveled it at Solo's head and fired.

It was a powerful weapon and the report was thunderous. Fortunately that had nothing to do with the accuracy of the chauffeur's aim. It was a clean miss, but it accomplished its purpose. So sudden and unexpected was the blast that Solo remained stunned for an instant. Illya had taken a quick step toward him, away from the woman on the pavement and was equally stunned by the nearness of the blast.

It gave the chauffeur just enough time to lift the Chinese woman in his arms and stagger with her back to the car. Before Solo could fire again the limousine was roaring down the street in the opposite direction from which it had come.

FOUR

THE WEB TIGHTENS

ALEXANDER WAVERLY, for the second time that day, had ceased to be his usual business-like self. A small muscle in his jaw twitched as he stood staring down at the angular, somewhat flattened metal object on his desk.

The object had been removed from the attache case which Solo had carried into the quiet brownstone, and turned over to U.N.C.L.E.'s most experienced bomb-disassembling expert without delay. A number of unattached wires projected from a yawning cavity from which a metal cap had been lifted by Waverly himself, for the expert had assured him that the device was now as harmless as the paperweight which had been pushed aside to make room for it in the precise middle of the desk.

"You would both have been killed instantly," Waverly said. "It would have been hurled straight at you, and they would have dropped to the pavement and flattened themselves. The blast would have ripped through you at chest-level, and blown you apart. It has a built-in radiation dampening mechanism,

which goes into operation the instant the concussion starts to spread."

Waverly nodded grimly, his eyes riveted to the dismantled instrument of destruction on his desk. "A self-limiting bomb with a vengeance—an achievement we've kept so secret, so scrupulously guarded, its theft would have seemed inconceivable to me if those two telecasts hadn't convinced me that all of our technological secrets are in jeopardy. From what you told me that long-gowned woman said—"

He stopped, as if the startled exclamation which the announcement had elicited from Solo had reminded him that an apology was due. "I had no intention, of course, of keeping it a secret from you, Mr. Solo. Or from you, Mr. Kuryakin. But its perfection was of very recent date, and for the past few days what you saw on the screen this morning has driven every other thought from my mind."

"It was natural enough for you to think that the telecasts had nothing to do with the perfection of a new kind of—hand grenade, I guess you'd call it," Solo said, nodding. "If the theft had not occurred the matter would have been of no great importance. Field testing of such a device can't be hurried, as a rule. You'd have let us know about it before it became operational."

"It seems to have taken THRUSH a comparatively short time to duplicate it, make it operational right in front of this house." Waverly paused an instant to stare down again at the device on his desk.

"If the chauffeur had been willing to sacrifice his long-gowned girl friend and had snatched up the attache case instead we might have had a conclusive demonstration of the weapon's effectiveness in a field test. Only you wouldn't have been here to fill us in."

"I don't think she was his girl friend, Mr. Waverly," Illya said. "Or the girl friend of the man who was carrying the attache case."

"Why not?" Waverly asked.

"The chauffeur must have been extremely fond of her, to take the risk he did. The chances were all against him, and if he hadn't fired at almost point-blank range and moved incredibly fast after scoring a miss—"

"I think I know why Mr. Kuryakin shares my feeling that she wasn't the girl friend of the two younger men," Solo said. "Or of the elderly one, for that matter. Just the fact that there were no weapons on her person suggests that she had absolute confidence in the weapon they stole from us. She almost had to have another reason for being there."

"You've told me what you thought that reason might have been," Alexander Waverly reminded him. "To round out the picture in Chinese brocade. Take the long-gowned woman away and what reason would you have had to think that they were headed for the United Nations?"

"They could have made it look convincing in some other way," Solo said. "What I told you was true—up to a point. But I still believe she had another reason for being there."

"Well, let's have it," Waverly said. "I hope it's based on something more solid than conjecture."

"It may have to be partly conjecture," Solo said. "There's nothing about this affair that provides the kind of evidence a lawyer could use in a courtroom to convince a jury. We're dealing with empire of crime that knows how to strike in the dark and leave plenty of misleading clues."

"An empire of crime," Waverly said, nodding. "I think I know why you referred to THRUSH in that way, Mr. Solo. You're going to tell me she impressed you as being—well, empresslike. By her manner, perhaps. An air of dominance about her?"

Solo found it difficult to conceal his astonishment. "That hits it pretty squarely on the head," he said. "She didn't do any actual commanding. But there was something about her, all apart from her striking beauty, that made me feel she was accustomed to giving orders and would if the need arose."

"I got that impression too," Illya said. "I think Mr. Solo means that she was there because the attack was so important that she felt her presence might be needed. She wanted to make sure it went off as planned."

"There's one thing that strongly supports that conjecture," Waverly conceded, nodding. "What she said to Mr. Solo. 'Knowing that you are under observation, night and day, will make you more vulnerable. We are so strong now we can afford to let you know this."

"That's about it," Solo said. "I was so concerned about what was happening at the end of the street I didn't catch everything she said."

"You caught enough," Waverly

said. "Only someone very high up in THRUSH would have talked that way. She was deliberately revealing something that ordinarily would have been kept a carefully guarded secret, in a clear attempt to spread demoralization throughout our entire organization."

"But she must have been lying, Mr. Waverly," Illya said. "If everything that takes place here is instantly known to THRUSH, including what we're saying right now, we'd be facing a threat to our survival that could destroy us in a week. The blueprints alone—" Something in Waverly's eyes stopped him from going on.

"IF THEIR eavesdropping capacity had reached that stage we would have been destroyed already," Illya Kuryakin said. "Make no mistake about that. A continuous conversational pickup would be a weapon we'd have no way of overcoming."

"But what about the Newfoundland and Gobi telecasts?" Solo said. "And the theft and swift duplication of at least one of our weapons? The failure of their surprise attack doesn't strip it of its eavesdropping implications. They undoubtedly knew just when we'd be leaving this house, after looking at the telecasts and discussing the Gobi assignment. Their timing was perfect."

"That observation is very much to the point," Waverly said. "But to me it's far from conclusive. They must have possessed the stolen weapon long before they planned the attack, for they could hardly have duplicated it overnight. A minor consideration, but an important one. It suggests that they've been gathering information piecemeal, sporadically, over a considerable period of time."

Waverly remained silent for an instant. Then he said: "I mentioned operational delays in connection with the actual field testing of a new weapon. The weapon may work very well once or twice and then develop defects which it may take a long time to overcome."

Waverly's expression became increasingly grim. "Sometimes it works perfectly for ten or twelve test runs and then breaks down completely. Or it may not work at all at first, and suddenly be just right."

"Then you're suggesting—" Solo paused, waiting for the older man to continue. He had spoken more to reassure his chief that he had been listening intently than because he was impatient to know what Waverly was going to say. He had very little doubt on that score.

"I'm almost certain that THRUSH's new eavesdropping weapon is still in the experimental testing stage," Waverly went on earnestly. "Apparently they are having difficulties with it, despite the Newfoundland and Gobi tele-

casts. If it worked to perfection we'd know about it, because we'd be in immediate trouble on a global scale. That hasn't happened *so far.*"

Waverly's expression made it plain that he shared their belief that U.N.C.L.E. had never before been confronted with quite so grave a peril.

He said: "I am advancing your departure by fifteen hours. Any further delay would be extremely unwise and there is no actual need for it. All of the arrangements which must be made can, I'm confident, be completed before you arrive in Tokyo."

FIVE

TOKYO BRIEFING

THE MAN WHO had met them at the Tokyo airport a half hour previously said: "Setting you down in the Gobi by helicopter will be no problem at all. You can forget all about the political hazards. You'll be nondescript Europeans on an archeological junket."

He was a small, gray man with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke and he displayed the kind of assurance that Napoleon Solo liked. His name was Roger Harris and he spoke with a slight Scottish accent.

"The Gobi has a way of making both Americans and Europeans invisible," he went on smilingly. "You'll be swallowed up in its vastness. Security barriers are practically non-existent in the area where Blakeley vanished. A dozen 'copters could cross that area fifty times a week, and no one would be the wiser."

Solo nodded and looked around the steel-walled, sound-proof room in which the briefing was taking place.

"U.N.C.L.E. has few friends in that particular area," Harris went on, as if aware of Solo's thoughts. "But by the same token, few enemies to worry about. You can travel for miles and meet no one at all. The native guides and trackers don't give a hoot about politics. The camels probably know more about ideology than they do—because when some harsh little official has a mission to complete you can be sure he doesn't spare them."

"Planes haven't replaced camels to any extent, then?" Illya asked. "I thought perhaps tractors and even tanks had become quite common."

"Only in certain areas," Harris said. "In many parts of the desert the transportation system hasn't changed in four thousand years.

Harris glanced at his wrist-watch, set his steel-rimmed glasses a little more firmly on his nose and looked down at a paper on his desk.

"Everything has been arranged," he said. "Your itinerary will be a three-stage affair. You'll be flown by jet from Tokyo to a secret U.N.C.L.E. landing field in

Inner Mongolia and from there by 'copter to the Gobi and northward to the area where Blakeley vanished. Then the 'copter will take off but remain on call, and you'll go on with the three desert guides we've engaged to help you make sure that nothing that would be invisible from the air escapes you.

"You'll have to circle around quite a bit and examine many landscape features at very close range—the slow, patient way. A 'copter would have to keep setting you down and taking you off, and even then—"

"Yes, I understand all that," Solo said, nodding. "Mr. Waverly explained it to us in New York, stressed just how important experienced trackers are. The natives know as much about the Gobi as they do about the lines on their palms. We, of course, are amateurs with a vengeance, as far as the Gobi is concerned."

"But not otherwise, Mr. Solo," Harris said, the smile returning to his lips. "Your desert accomplishments in other parts of the world would merit a double row of medals, if U.N.C.L.E. did not have a prejudice against rewarding merit in that way. It has always seemed to me a needless restriction."

His gaze passed to Illya. "You also, Mr. Kuryakin. Your reputation has gone before you, if you'll forgive my saying so." The levity went out of his eyes.

"The instant you leave this building you will be driven straight to the plane which will fly you to Inner Mongolia. Mr. Waverly felt no conversation should pass between us concerning the precise moment of your departure until I set the time myself at the end of your briefing. The pilots of the plane do not even know the exact time of your arrival. They have merely been instructed to be ready to take off the instant you appear at the airfield."

Harris restacked the papers on his desk into a slightly neater-looking pile and arose. "Well then," he said. "I guess that takes care of everything. Good luck to both of you."

THE TWO GUARDS stationed at the high, mesh-wire gate of the airfield had apparently signaled the control tower that an authorized car was coming, for the gate swung slowly open as the limousine bearing the two U.N.C.L.E. agents approached.

As the car swept past the guards, who stood stiffly at attention, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin relaxed a little. They were certain that they had not been followed. The car continued on across the airfield toward the seven jets that stood at irregular intervals on the far side of the control tower. There were several empty runways and no stir or activity at all around the slender gray planes.

There could be no doubt that

U.N.C.L.E.'s Tokyo unit had planned well. Careful timing could apparently work miracles.

In a competitive industrial setup, as Harris had explained to them before their departure, secrecy could be carried so far that the arrival and departure of planes adhered to no set schedule, and the customary activities of an airfield could slow, at times, to a standstill. Government inspection was, of course, unavoidable. But it could be made infrequently by a scrupulous avoidance of flight requirement violations, and a little judicious wire-pulling.

Among the nondescript Japanese jets there would, Solo felt be a plane of quite different character. Silk contracts and the discreet consignment of forbidden merchandise to the highest bidder would have nothing whatever to do with its swift takeoff. He was equally certain that the agent at the wheel of the limousine would be quick to recognize that particular jet.

He was not mistaken. But its distinguishing mark, a tiny glow-dot on one of its swept-back wings, was so inconspicuous that Solo would have failed to notice it if the driver hadn't halted the car and called it to his attention.

"Well, here's where we part," he said. "You'll be high in the sky in just about eight more minutes. Setting you down in Inner Mongolia will be no problem for Hart and Ovenden. They're not just competent pilots. There are none better anywhere."

Kuryakin said, "Just how top-echelon are the pilots who'll be waiting for us in the helicopter?"

"Just as experienced," the U.N.C.L.E. agent at the wheel said. "They made six flights over the Gobi before Blakeley disappeared."

"There are a lot of things we don't know," Solo said wryly. "Including what the Gobi does to you when you look down on it from the air for the first time."

The agent at the wheel grinned. "Don't worry. The lads who'll meet you at sunrise survived it and are in the best of spirits. Good luck now. Success all the way."

"Thanks," Solo said, returning the other's grin. "Luck should be at a premium in the Gobi. But maybe we can scrape up enough to see us through."

Solo and Illya descended from the car, and crossed to the jet without looking back. The aluminum ladder had twenty-five or thirty rungs, but they ascended so swiftly that they were inside the plane before the usual transition from sunlight to artificial light could be adjusted to gradually.

For a moment their vision remained hazy and they could barely make out two tall figures standing just outside the pilot compartment where the double row of seats terminated. They could hear the ladder being drawn up as one of

them advanced toward them, his features a blurred oval.

His hand was extended in greeting and before he spoke Solo's vision became much clearer, and he recognized the man from the description which Harris had given him.

"You got here in good time," the tall pilot said. "Mr. Harris instructed us to take off immediately. That we can do. Unless, of course, there's something he may have neglected to tell us you'd like to talk about first. We're in no immediate danger and a few extra minutes—"

Solo shook his head. "The sooner we're in the air the better I'll feel," he said. "I'm not sure just how detailed Mr. Harris' instructions were. But we have reason to believe that what we're saying now could set off an alert that could prove dangerous at the end of—well, say fifteen or twenty minutes. It would all depend on how quickly a THRUSH plane or armored car could get here."

The pilot's equally tall companion had joined him in time to catch what Solo was saying. "Yes, of course, we realize that," he said, replying without waiting for the other to nod in agreement. "I'm Thomas Ovenden. This is Mr. Hart. Our instructions were very detailed. Your briefing took place under unusual precautions, in a soundproof room. And you were rushed here immediately, with the

time and destination not revealed to you until you were ready to leave—solely as an added precaution."

He paused an instant, then went on quickly: "We had no knowledge as to precisely when you would arrive. We were just warned to remain on the alert, that your actual arrival would take the place of a transmitted message. Now that you're here I agree that we should take off immediately."

"We can risk perhaps another minute—against my better judgment," Solo said. "Just how were your instructions conveyed to you—remaining on the alert and all that? Surely not in short wave, scrambled or otherwise.

The pilot who had identified himself as Ovenden and whose hawklike features and British accent matched the description Harris had supplied shook his head. "No range finding risk, if that's what you're thinking. We've never sent Harris a message or received one on this airfield. This plane has been here for a week, and all ar-

rangements concerning it were made before your arrival in Tokyo. Previous to your arrival it was used by our Tokyo unit for other purposes. We received our instructions in the same soundproof room where you were briefed, before Mr. Harris met you at the airport. Then we drove straight here. A three-hour drive, as you know."

"We're wasting precious seconds," Illya Kuryakin said. "Pilots are seldom briefed that extensively. But I guess it was necessary in this case. Since you know so much we can have an enjoyable time discussing it. *But not now.*"

There was a harsh impatience in Illya's voice, but neither of the two pilots appeared to resent it. They nodded, turned and strode swiftly back along the aisle to the pilot compartment. The dividing panel opened and closed and Solo remained standing very still for a moment, staring at Illya in surprise.

"That came close to a reprimand," Solo said. "It wasn't their fault they were told so much. Harris must have had a reason—"

"There's something about this I don't like," Illya said. "I can't pin it down, exactly. But when you said, 'We can risk another minute' they seemed to leap at the opportunity of spelling everything out. At least, Overden did, as if he was afraid you wouldn't believe him."

"He just answered my question," Solo pointed out. "Fairly concisely, I'd say. He could see I was concerned. If that's all that's bugging you—"

"If THRUSH could pick human voices right out of the air on a Newfoundland headland and send that pickup instantly racing along undersea to a THRUSH submarine in a matter of minutes anything is possible," Illya said.

"You're suggesting, then—" Solo paused, to stare at Illya intently. It was a thought which, unknown to Illya, had flashed for the barest instant across his own mind. But he had dismissed as too incredible, in view of the fact that the two pilots conformed to the descriptions which Harris had given them, even to Ovenden's British accent. But the fact that Illya appeared to take it seriously gave him pause, for he had the highest respect for the younger agent's judgment.

"I'm not sure," Illya said. He hesitated, a look of deepening concern in his eyes. He was returning Napoleon Solo's stare.

"They seemed to know more than Harris could have told them," he said, clearly unaware of how much progress he had made in that respect. "One or two small details almost on the—well, the all-seeing level. All-seeing as far as this particular operation goes, if you know what I mean. That may sound a little far-out, but—"

"It doesn't," Solo said quickly. "It fits, in a way, and I don't like it either. But there are—"

They both saw it at the same

instant, a thin ribbon of blood snaking across the passenger cabin between the double row of seats close to where they were standing.

SOLO DREW in his breath sharply, and gripped the arm of the last seat on the left side of the aisle as he stared down at it. Kuryakin gripped Solo's arm just as tightly, and pointed in silence at the scarlet trickle. He seemed not to realize that there was no need for him to draw Solo's attention to it.

Though Solo's voice, when it came, was perfectly controlled its very calmness had a forced quality.

"Now we are sure," he said. "Stay right where you are, and watch the pilot compartment while I look. They've been dragged out of sight somewhere behind us—no room under the seats. If the panel opens shoot to kill."

"Right," Illya said. "But make it quick. If the plane takes off—"

"We've got to risk that," Solo said. "If they're still alive, we'll need them. If they've been killed we'll have at least a fighting chance of forcing those THRUSH pilots to set us down in Inner Mongolia.The odds against us will be heavier if we don't know what the score is."

Illya nodded and worked a special pistol with a five-inch barrel loose from its holder beneath his coat. He trained it on the pilot compartment, his lips set in tight lines.

"Go ahead," he said. "We could be making a mistake by not blasting that pair right out of their seats first. But it's almost a toss-up. They'd be no good to us dead, as you say."

Solo gripped Illya firmly by the shoulder for an instant, his voice reassuring. "It will only take a minute to find out. Then we'll know exactly where we stand."

Solo swung about and moved swiftly into the shadowy rear section of the passenger cabin where the seats terminated. He glanced just as swiftly around him, his eyes sweeping over the entire section. He saw nothing at first but a gray expanse of metal hemming him in on four sides. Then he looked down and saw that the ribbon of blood—it had widened slightly—led from the last of the seats to a point midway between the seats and a paneled doorway which matched the one which opened on the pilot compartment at the opposite end of the passenger cabin.

He was not interested in what he might have found beyond that doorway, because the ribbon of blood terminated in another panel set midway in the rear section.

It could hardly have opened on a large compartment, in view of its location. He was almost sure that it opened on a small storage compartment.

The panel did not open when he tugged at the small metal knob which projected from it. He removed from his pocket a knifelike device as specialized as the ex-

tremely short-barreled pistol which Illya was keeping trained on the pilot compartment and set to work on the knob and the lock on the inner side of the panel which prevented him from turning it.

The knifelike device had six blades and the one which he used on the knob was hollow. From it there came a beam of heat.

The knob glowed white-hot for an instant, then disintegrated. The glow vanished without spreading and an ash-encircled aperture an inch in diameter replaced the vanished knob.

Into the aperture Napoleon Solo inserted another blade terminating in a tiny metal hand, flexible-fingered. There was a faint clicking noise as the lock opened and the metal panel glided slowly leftward under the steady pressure of his palm.

He found himself staring into a lighted storage compartment about nine feet square.

His lips tightened as he stared. But it was not as shaken as he might have been if he had not visualized in advance almost precisely how the two U.N.C.L.E. pilots had fared.

They were both securely bound. One sat upright with his eyes wide open in the middle of the compartment, two feet from where the other lay with his back to the panel, his body grotesquely contorted.

Both bore a twin-close resemblance to the two THRUSH agents in general build, the pilot sitting upright a facial resemblance to the most talkative of that spurious pair which identified him as Ovenden.

The thin ribbon of blood was coming from beneath the right shoulder of the pilot lying prone, but it was wider than a ribbon at its source. There was an unmistakable look of recognition in Ovenden's eyes as he returned Solo's stare and, tightly bound as he was, he made an effort to rise.

Solo shook his head, gesturing as he spoke. "No, don't try to get up," he cautioned. "I'll have you untied in a moment. You must be Ovenden. I'm Napoleon Solo. But we've no time to talk. Just lie still now—"

"Hart's badly wounded," Ovenden said, nodding. "He may be dead. I don't know. They took us by surprise—"

"How long ago?" Solo asked, kneeling at Ovenden's side and setting expertly to work on the cords at his wrists.

"An hour perhaps. One of them clobbered me, but I don't think the blackout lasted for more than a minute or two. The panel was just closing when I came to."

"They bound you up fast and left. Is that it?"

Ovenden smiled faintly. "That's right. My own twin brother clobbered me. At least that's what anyone would have thought. He even had my Sussex accent down pat.

The other one shot Hart, when he put up a fight."

Solo had freed Ovenden's wrists and was working just as expertly at the cords at his ankles when he paused an instant to grip him firmly by the arm.

"Listen carefully. The THRUSH agent who clobbered you and the one who made us believe he was Hart are sitting in the pilot compartment about ready to take off. Kuryakin is sitting with a gun trained on the panel, in case something makes them suspicious. There's something more—"

"Go on," Ovenden said, as the cords at his ankle fell away. "I can see we'll have to act fast—"

"You've guessed it," Solo said. "With your help we'll have an even better chance to take them. Three against a very dangerous two. Make no mistake about that. They're armed, of course."

"Don't I know it!" Ovenden said.

"This time U.N.C.L.E has the advantage of surprise. But first you can help me find out just how badly Hart is wounded. We've got to turn him over and raise him very gently, in case it's real bad."

It took them only a moment to find out just how bad it was. When they knelt on both sides of the prone pilot and raised him to a sitting position his glassily staring eyes made it impossible for them to doubt that he was dead.

They eased him just as gently back to a prone position and stood

up. A moment later they were moving swiftly toward the double row of chairs, where Illya Kuryakin was still sitting motionless with his gun trained on the closed panel of the pilot compartment. Just as they reached his side a distinct tremor passed through the plane and an all-too-familiar hum made their eardrums vibrate. The jet had taken off.

SIX

STAY ALERT—OR DIE

A SURPRISE ATTACK on two armed THRUSH pilots in a jet that had broken the sound barrier could so easily have sent the plane spiraling earthward, perhaps in flames, that Solo, Illya and the man at their side paused for an instant to discuss it in whispers before opening the panel wide.

"We may have to shoot it out with them," Solo said. "But let's hope we can avoid that risk. With guns at their backs we should be

able to persuade them to surrender their pistols and set the controls to keep the plane stable and on course until we've walked them back here. Guns at their backs first. Is that clear?"

He turned and spoke directly to Ovenden before the pilot or Illya Kuryakin could reply. "How long do you think it will take you to slip into one of the vacated pilot seats and take over? Perhaps we can skip ordering them to set the controls."

Ovenden shook his head. "Not wise," he said. "I'll stand behind you and watch every move they make. If they set the controls a fraction off, or try to, I'll know. For a few seconds it may be touch and go, and a lot of things could keep me from taking over in time. With the controls set we'll have an added margin of safety."

A grim smile flickered for an instant on his lips. "If there's any shooting an extra gun would be of more value than a sitting duck in the pilot seat."

"I couldn't agree more," Solo said. "Here we go then. Our timing had better be good."

Solo opened the panel wide and moved swiftly into the pilot compartment up behind Ovenden's THRUSH twin, whose rigid posture as he sat leaning forward over the controls gave him almost the look of a carven stone replica of the man whose identity he had assumed. Illya moved just as quickly up behind the second pilot. Both agents jammed their pistols against the backs of the seated men at the same instant, but it was Solo who did the talking.

"Don't make a move until I tell you what to do," he said. "That goes for both of you. Keep your reflexes under control. If you don't —you'll be blown apart."

Ovenden had taken up his position just behind the pair, midway between Solo and Illya.

He spoke as warningly as Solo had done, the instant the vituperation stopped. "Set the controls! Be quick about it, if you want to stay alive. I'll be watching every move you make."

The two pilots obeyed, in total silence. Solo watched their hands moving over the panel as closely as Ovenden did, and though he lacked Ovenden's specialized knowledge as to just how they should be set to keep the jet steadily on course he was sure that it was being done right. Otherwise Ovenden would have tapped him lightly on the back and advised him to let the gun in his hand go off.

Solo darted one brief glance at Illya and saw that the latter was just as alert, his eyes trained on the rapidly moving fingers of the pilot in his charge.

As soon as the task was completed Solo said: "All right now, get up. Very slowly. Then turn around, just as slowly, and walk back through the panel to the near-

est seat. When you're both seated we are going to have the pleasure of tying you up. That will spoil your comfort just a little, I'm afraid. But a coffin would be much more cramping. Don't fail to bear that in mind."

The pilot who had assumed the identity of Hart fell in the suggestion instantly and had risen and was just starting to turn when the other took a risk that could easily have proved suicidal.

Instead of rising he lurched violently sideways and then let his entire body sag. He was below the seat, and pivoting about on his knees when Solo's gun went off. As the gun roared Solo was thrown off balance by the tight grip which the insanely reckless THRUSH pilot instantly clamped on his knees. But only for an instant. Before the smoke of the blast cleared Solo had not only succeeded in regaining his balance but was smashing down with the barrel of his gun on the kneeling pilot's skull.

As the man collapsed with a groan he heard Illya Kuryakin cry out sharply. "Don't try what he did! Stop turning. Stand perfectly still. Don't force me to put a bullet through your head."

Solo stood for a moment utterly rigid, his eyes sweeping the pilot compartment in concern. Then Ovenden was at his side, staring down at the slumped pilot at the base of the seat. The pilot in Illya's charge was still on his feet, staring into the barrel of Kuryakin's short-muzzled weapon.

"Look around you quickly," Solo breathed, gripping Ovenden's arm. "Did that shot do any damage, do you think? If it shattered one of the instruments—"

Ovenden shook his head. "No, I'm sure it didn't. The panel's okay."

Minutes later both pilots were sitting securely bound in the two front seats of the passenger cabin.

Obviously, THRUSH had indeed moved fast, in the space of six or seven short hours, to put a personnel computer to work and send a car speeding down the road to the airfield containing two operatives who bore the closest possible resemblance to Ovenden and Hart, right down to Ovenden's British accent. It must, Napoleon Solo told himself, have involved a miracle of almost lightning swift planning.

The disguise itself had presented no great problem, for the physical characteristics of Ovenden and Hart were not difficult to simulate with the help of judiciously applied makeup. They were frequently encountered types in a flattering sense, for they were robustly built with clean-cut, handsome features. There were many Harts and Ovendens, and although Ovenden's British accent may have presented more of a problem it had apparently not proved insurmountable, since THRUSH had avilable for in-

stant assignment not a few operatives with British accents.

Just how a THRUSH car had succeeded in getting past the gate of the privately owned airfield without arousing suspicion was anybody's guess, and had now became of comparatively minor importance, though Solo made a mental note that Harris must eventually be informed that U.N.C.L.E.'s undercover influence might be on the wane at that particular airfield.

Solo had no longer any doubt that, whether Waverly was right or wrong about the inscrutable instrument of science which THRUSH had at its command, it had functioned twice in Tokyo with absolute accuracy. Twice THRUSH ears had listened in on a conversation in a sound-proof room in which no listening device could possibly have been concealed—had spied on plans discussed with absolute secrecy, and taken instant measures to bring about his and Illya's destruction.

More than their destruction, perhaps, for if the two THRUSH pilots had succeeded they would not have been taken to Inner Mongolia, but in all likelihood to a THRUSH cell.

But important as knowing all that was, it paled into temporary insignificance before a single question that Solo felt he should perhaps not have waited quite so long to ask Ovenden. He asked it now.

"Can you fly this jet alone to Inner Mongolia? If you can't, we'll have to turn back. But returning to Tokyo now would jeopardize our entire mission. THRUSH is on the alert with a vengeance now."

Ovenden stared at Solo steadily for a moment before he said: "I can try. That is all that I can promise."

"With a reasonable chance of succeeding? Be completely honest."

"An eighty percent chance, I think," Ovenden said. "Not higher."

"Good enough," Solo said. "If we returned to Tokyo the odds would be just as high."

Solo turned to Illya. "I don't think we'll be making a mistake if we stay right on course. How do you feel about it?"

"Precisely as you do," Illya said.

"Both of the pilot seats have veen vacant for fifteen or twenty minutes," Solo said. "I wouldn't enjoy flying on set controls all the way to China. It's time for one of those chairs to be occupied by someone in whom I have complete trust. We'll be over the Sea of Japan in another ten minutes."

"I'll do my best," Ovenden said. He gestured toward the bound THRUSH pilots. "What will we do with them?"

"They'll have to live on goat's milk for awhile in Inner Mongolia," Solo said. "We'll just set them out to pasture." Solo's expression changed, became more

somber. "There will have to be a burial at sea, I'm afraid," he said. "Unless—"

He paused an instant, then shook his head. "No, a grave in a desert waste, so remote from civilization, would be very much the same thing, and a burial at sea—"

"I think Hart would have preferred that," Ovenden said, nodding.

SEVEN

IN THE LAND OF AN ANGRY SUN

HAD IT NOT been for the sound of human voices around him, the Gobi would have seemed unreal to Napoleon Solo.

The hot, bright sunlight, the endless miles of trackless desert and the scoured, brightly gleaming bowl of the sky had combined to make Solo feel that he had been set down by a long departed helicopter in some larger-than-life wasteland that had come spiraling straight out of the unknown. But in another way it was as real as the glistening lake of perspiration on his brow.

"We certainly can't complain about the timing of that 'copter pickup," Solo said. "But Harris seems to have arranged this stage even better. Practically to perfection so far, and we've no reason to believe there's going to be any change. Sun Lin is a first-rate guide, the best. He never raises his voice. But have you noticed how expeditiously he gets things done?"

"I've noticed," Illya Kuryakin said, nodding. "I've an idea he'll appreciate the compliment. He has pretty sharp hearing."

As the two agents turned back toward their camels and the motionless figure of the head guide Solo had no doubt at all that Illya was correct in his surmise. Precisely what did the Gobi, he wondered, symbolize to the oriental mind? Probably just the harnessing and unharnessing of camels, the pitching of camp at nightfall and the rushing in the dawn that preceded another long day's journey across endless miles of sand.

He was equally sure that Sun Lin was no fool and a better than average desert tracker and guide.

"How long will it be?" he asked. "Two more hours—three?"

"We are very close to where the American you seek was last seen," Sun Lin said. "Two hours, yes. But it will be dark when we get there."

"I was afraid of that," Illya said. "It's getting dark already. We'll probably have to postpone our search until tomorrow."

"The time factor isn't that important," Solo said. "Blakeley vanished three weeks ago, so what difference will a few extra hours make? Starting from where he was last seen and searching the surrounding desert is probably our best bet, but we can't be sure of

anything. He may have wandered on for miles, may even have reached Inner Mongolia—"

Solo gestured toward a rise in the sand a hundred feet to the east of them. "He could be sitting right over there, behind that big dune, down to his last drop of water."

"You're taking it for granted that he's still alive," Illya said. "I'm afraid I'm not that optimistic."

"I'm only optimistic about one thing," Solo said. "A desert waste where there's little or no rainfall and travelers are rarely encountered can stay unchanged for weeks. If we search carefully we may find some clue as to precisely what happened—evidences of a struggle perhaps, or footprints leading in just one direction."

"I guess I can buy that," Illya said. "Onward then, with stout hearts and banners flying."

Solo looked back and saw that Sun Lin's two desert-tracking companions had halted their camels some sixty feet from where he had dismounted with Kuryakin and the enigmatic oriental. He gestured for the journey to be resumed, remounting his own camel as he did so.

A moment later all five camels were jogging onward again over an almost level expanse of sand, with Solo and Kuryakin rewarding their untiring mounts with occasional hump-pattings which the camels seemed to appreciate, for it caused them to move at a slightly faster pace. They were quite different from fast-stepping horses, however, and though they could outdistance the wind in speed under the goadings of desert raiders they seemed to prefer to move in much more leisurely fashion.

The twilight which preceded the coming of darkness was of short duration, and before an hour had passed the sky was sprinkled with stars and a crescent moon had made its appearance amidst fleecy clouds close to the desert's rim.

They continued on for another hour, with Solo and Kuryakin slightly in the lead. Then, abruptly, Sun Lin halted his camel and pointed out across the sand to where a gigantic ridge of stone bisected the desert.

"It is near this spot that the American you seek was last seen," Sun Lin said.

"FOR MILES the landscape has been featureless," Napoleon Solo said. "And now we run into something like this, a rock formation that looks as if it had dropped down out of the sky with a *Made on Mars* label on it."

"It looks more like one of those rugged lunar landscapes we've been getting moon-probe photographs of," Kuryakin said. "It's honeycombed with caverns, but they can't be very large. Just pitted indentations, I'd say. The entire structure can't be more than a hundred feet in length."

"Do you suppose it actually did fall from the sky?" Solo said. "A meteor that large may have landed on Earth more than once. There was that Siberian one that splintered into fragments and shook up about a third of Russia."

Illya shook his head. "I don't think it's anything but a natural Gobi rock formation," he said. "It's only slightly weather-eroded, you'll notice, with no blasted out surfaces."

"Anything is possible in the Gobi. Is that what you're trying to say? I'm beginning to feel you could be right. In a legend-haunted desert—"

Illya Kuryakin smiled wryly. "Actually, there's nothing geologically unusual about a big rock castle in a desert that's as vast as the Gobi. It could be just a mountain that got tired of fighting its way up through ten or twelve million tons of sand when the earth was young."

"There's a lesson in that for us," Solo said. "We can't afford to get tired so early in the game. Tomorrow or the next day a sandstorm could bury us, along with every trace of what we came here to find."

"Right," Illya agreed. "Maybe we should start searching right now."

"It will be less of a risk in the morning," Solo said. "Everything will stand out clearly and sharply. And we're practically out on our feet. There's only one right way to

start a search when the time factor isn't of primary importance. The slow, careful way, skipping nothing, going over every inch of the ground."

"I guess you're right," Illya said. "I'll help Sun Lin and his boys get the tents unrolled. Otherwise it will take them half the night."

Pitching camp for the night in a desert waste was the opposite of a simple task. This Solo had discovered for himself several times in the past. His admiration for Sun Lin and that tireless oriental's two companions was boundless as he watched the swift and efficient way the tent poles were taken down from the camels, the canvas stretched out on the sand, the sleeping mats inspected for the possible presence of vermin and shaken out in the windless air.

His admiration increased when Sun Lin took barely five minutes to get the camels bedded down for the night in a comfortable hollow in

the sand. Then the tents went up and that, too, was a gratifying thing to watch when aching bones and throbbing temples made six or seven hours of sleep a luxury to be prized.

The entire task took about twenty minutes in all and it was surprising how much like a miniature tent city the entire arrangement looked. Just two tents, four drowsy camels and several wooden stakes driven in a circle into the sand gave the camp site a community look which was pleasant to contemplate with the moonlight shining down.

Neither Solo nor Kuryakin spent more than two or three minutes wrapped in contemplation, however, for they were out on their feet. Just crawling on their hands and knees into the cool interior of a tent and flopping down on sleeping mats seemed the wisest thing to do.

Five minutes after they had drawn the tent flap shut behind them they were sleeping soundly.

EIGHT

VIOLENCE IN THE SMALL HOURS

IT WAS not a gunshot which awakened them. It was a scream, agonized, prolonged, a scream that went on and on.

They awoke in total darkness, with no knowledge of the time, hearing only the scream shattering the silence of the night.

Solo was the first to leap to his feet, tighten the belt of his tropical shorts and rush out into the night, stopping only for an instant to give Kuryakin a resounding slap on the shoulder and shout a warning, on the off chance that he had not come fully awake.

But Illya was awake enough, and it took him only an instant to snatch a round of ammunition down from the tent pole and strap a holstered gun to his waist, a precaution which Solo had been in too much of a hurry to take.

The instant he emerged from the tent he saw that Napoleon Solo had already crossed the wide stretch of sand which separated the tent from the long rock structure which they had encircled in puzzlement before turning in for the night and was struggling with someone about his own height who had thrown one arm about his neck and was making a frantic effort to drag him to the sand.

Knowing that Solo was unarmed and that the struggling figure might well be clasping a knife made Illya break into a run without stopping to upholster his gun.

That his fear was justified he saw before he had crossed half of the intervening distance, for the sudden glint of moonlight on steel was unmistakable. The knife flashed twice and each flash was accompanied by a downward thrust

of the attacking figure's left arm.

Solo groaned loudly and fell to one knee. But he was almost instantly on his feet again, fighting desperately to keep the knife at arm's length.

Illya managed to get his gun out of its holster as he ran. But the two men were so entangled now that to risk a shot at Solo's assailant would have been the height of folly. But still he kept the weapon, a .38 calibre special, leveled and ready, his forefinger on the safety catch.

He crashed into the man just as his arm was going up for the third time, and Solo had started to sag, his right sleeve drenched with blood.

Reversing the pistol, Illya Kuryakin brought the butt-end down with violence on the maniacal knife-wielder's skull. But the knife continued to rise, the hand that held it thrusting upward with a violent jerk that carried the weapon high into the air. Then the man's arm fell back to his side and the knife dropped to the sand. He crashed down on top of it, rolled over and lay still.

His face, in the moonlight, was ghastly, the jaw sagging, the lips split in a half-idiotic grin. It was Chin Husan.

Solo was still on his feet, clutching his right arm as he swayed. "Sun Lin has been killed and that poor devil got the idea into his head that we're in some way responsible. He kept telling me that while he tried his best to kill me. He went crazy because of something he saw. I hope you didn't crack his skull."

"I hope so too, if he really was off his noggin and not just lying to you," Illya said.

"He'd have no reason to lie," Solo said, still clutching his arm. "Nothing else could have made him slash at me that way. He had a wild look in his eyes."

"Your arm," Illya said. "How bad is it?"

"I'll live," Solo said, wryly. "Just a ribbon of skin sliced away. But if he hadn't missed with his first try it could have been real bad."

"You're bleeding like a pig. You'd better get a bandage on it fast."

"I'll get around to it. But first we're going to have a look at what's on the other side of this big ridge of stone."

"What do you expect to find?"

"Sun Lin, crushed, battered to a pulp. And some strange markings in the sand all around him."

"He told you all that while he was doing his best to plunge a knife into your heart?"

Solo nodded. "He was chattering away every second."

They didn't see horror until they were almost upon it, for despite the brightness of the moonlight much of the rock structure was in shadows. Sun Lin had been a small man in life and the terrible vio-

lence that had been done to him made him seem even more inconspicuous in death. His rib cage was completely crushed, his limbs so flattened they resembled gruesome traceries made with a stick on the sand.

Not only was the dead man's clothing torn, it had a singed look, as if the tatters into which they had been ripped had passed through a sheet of flame. The head lolled and there was a deep gash at the base of the oddly discolored neck.

"Curshed to death," Illya Kuryakin muttered, more shaken than he would have cared to admit. "That's what you said, wasn't it? What could have inflicted such injuries?"

The moonlight seemed to shift a little as he spoke, causing the shadows to lengthen and change shape.

Solo shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "We must have had a visitor in the night."

Sweat stood out on Illya's brow. He moved a little away from the corpse, his eyes sweeping the sand within a ten foot radius. Suddenly he seemed to remember something else that Napoleon Solo had repeated as coming from the lips of the deranged man who had tried to kill him, for he bent to examine more closely a huge, circular indentation in the sand.

"There are more of those markings," Solo said, as if aware of his thoughts. "Over there—look."

He gestured toward a wider expanse of sand a few yards to the right of him. The moonlight brought into sharp relief two deep, crater-like depressions in the sand, perfectly circular and set fairly far apart.

"They don't look like footprints," Illya said, following the direction of his gaze. "Only a giant could have made prints that large and they're perfectly round. It's as if—" He hesitated. "It's almost as if he were on stilts. The giant, I mean. A giant walking on stilts and trampling Sun Li into the sand. Crushing and killing him."

"Would you care to put that into a report?" Solo asked, a look of grim reproach in his eyes. "A tank passing over him would be a more sensible guess."

"But we didn't hear a sound," Illya said. "Except, of course, that scream. Just the fact that Chin Husan was screaming loudly enough to wake the dead—"

Kuryakin stopped, puzzled by the look which Solo continued to train on him.

"What makes you think it was Chin Husan who screamed?" Solo asked.

"I naturally thought, when the screaming stopped, and I saw you struggling with him—"

"Chin Husan didn't make a sound until he closed with me," Solo said. "Then he started chattering wildly about what he'd just seen. It was Sun Lin who screamed. I'm sure of it."

"Well, it fits," Illya conceded. "I

hope I'll never have to listen to a scream like that again."

"Or see what Sun Lin saw coming toward him across the desert before the life was crushed out of him. If that's what you're thinking I'm with you one hundred percent."

"I'm not sure that's what I'm thinking," Illya said. "I'm not sure of anything, except that he could hardly have just stumbled and crushed in his ribs and broken his neck and slashed himself up in a dozen places."

"We have a witness," Solo said. "Just the fact that Chin Husan ran amuck like a Malay on the deck of an Indian Ocean freighter for a minute or two doesn't mean the aberration is going to last. If you didn't fracture his skull—"

"A gentle tap wouldn't have stopped him from sinking that knife in your ribs," Illya said. "It was nothing that could be helped. There's a first aid kit in the duffel bag Lin Sun tossed into the tent just before we dozed off. You'd better bandage your arm before you collapse."

"You can say that again," Solo grunted. "All right. We may as well get back to the tent. It will do Chin Husan no harm to rest up a bit."

It took them longer than they had anticipated to cross the level stretch of sand between the rock structure and the tent, because they made the mistake—or perhaps it wasn't a mistake—of glancing toward the hollow where the camels were supposed to be sleeping.

The camels were gone. Not only had all five of the animals vanished, but the tent which the three orientals had shared had been taken down and there was no sign anywhere of Nieh Huang.

They halted abruptly in their tracks and stared across the empty expanse of desert with a chill foreboding. It might have come as less of a shock if there had been some way of making sure, right at that instant, that Nieh Huang had not robbed them of everything but the clothes on their backs. Tropical shorts and one gun were hardly survival-level safeguards in the middle of the Gobi.

Fortunately so absolute a disaster had not taken place, as they discovered when they continued on to the tent, and found all of their personal belongings intact.

It was the portable shortwave transmitter which Solo seized upon first, inspecting it carefully to make sure that it had not been tampered with.

"We'll have to signal the 'copter to pick us up," Solo said. "Without camels or replacements for Sun Lin and Nieh Huang we can't do any more exploring on foot, that's for sure. I might be willing to risk it with just one guide and one camel between us. But I can't see Chin Husan as that guide. And we have

not got one camel. Why did he have to take our camels? That's what I can't understand."

"Maybe he didn't," Kuryakin said. "Maybe they became frightened and took advantage of Sun Lin's failure to tie them up. Ordinarily a camel doesn't have to be tied up for the night. But if they saw whatever it was that trampled Sun Lin to death—"

"We'll have to signal the 'copter," Solo said. "We have no choice. It won't prevent us from searching this particular spot more thoroughly—for a few hours, at least, while the chopper stands by. But another day's journey over the sand is definitely out. If that still seems a worthwhile gamble we'll have to return to the coast, engage some new guides and arrange for them to meet us here when the 'copter sets us down for the second time."

"Does that appeal to you?" Illya said. "It doesn't to me."

"It's what Waverly would expect us to do," Solo reminded him soberly.

Illya's eyes widened, looking at Solo's still unbandaged arm. "You haven't even taken a good look at that wound," he said. "Don't tell me it's just a scratch. In a climate like this infection can set in fast."

"I did take a look," Solo said. "While we were rounding that long ridge of rock. It's not a scratch, exactly. But it's nothing to be alarmed about."

It took Solo less than five minutes to dress and bandage the wound but Illya could see that he made a thorough job of it.

Kuryakin kept looking toward the tent flap and there was no need for him to speculate as to the reason for Solo's haste, for he kept talking as he drew the bandage tight.

"Chin Husan has either regained consciousness by now or he'll be needing the kind of medical aid this kit can't supply. I'm not sure I shouldn't have let my arm go until—"

Illya shook his head. "Antiseptic should have been poured on that wound before this. You took a dangerous risk in not stopping the bleeding at once."

"All right," Solo said. "But let's get moving. We don't want Chin Husan to vanish into the desert before we have a chance to talk to him. He's had plenty of time to get up and go staggering off."

"I hope the blow sobered him and he can talk rationally," Illya said.

"If he can talk at all," Solo said. "Right now, that's the only thing I'm concerned about."

There was a faint flush of dawn on the desert's rim far to the east when they emerged from the tent and moved toward the rock structure—more cautiously now. Despite the faint dawn glow the desert was much darker than it had been ten minutes earlier, for the moon had passed behind a cloud

and the stars supplied very little light.

They could not make out more than the vague outlines of the rock structure and if Chin Husan still lay where he had fallen there was no possibility of confirming it until they had advanced within a few feet of where the struggle had taken place.

Solo drew in his breath sharply when he saw the huddled form swaying back and forth on the sand. He gestured Illya back, and went on alone until Chin Husan's harsh breathing brought him to a cautious halt.

NINE

THE FIRE DEMON

PERSUADING A wildly terrified oriental who had just regained consciousness to be calm proved more difficult than Napoleon Solo had thought it would.

It was made more difficult by the fact that Chin Husan, deprived of his reason by what he had seen, had directed all of his rage against Solo in a wholly irrational way. Despite the restoration of his sanity a little of that rage remained and the very firmness of Solo's hand on his arm threatened to bring all of it back again.

Luckily Chin Husan seemed to quiet down a little after considerable firmness had been applied and enough reassuring words had been poured into his ear. He continued to struggle, but less violently and he stopped completely when Illya said: "We are your friends, do you understand? We were Sun Lin's friends as well, both Mr. Solo and myself. We had nothing whatever to do with his death.

"A great anger came upon you and you stabbed Mr. Solo in the arm. It may have been because you saw Sun Lin die and we are strangers here, and you could not completely trust us. Is that what you thought? That we were in some way to blame for the terrible thing that happened to your friend?"

Chin Husan remained utterly motionless for an instant, as if a part of what Illya had said was bewildering to him, and he did not quite know what to say in reply. Then a convulsive shudder seized him, and he spoke with a quaver in his voice, his clawlike hands in rapid motion, as if he were drywashing them.

"I do not remember—stabbing Mr. Solo in the arm. But when the Fire Demon goes walking in the desert there are many things which

are best forgotten. We were as close as brothers but when the Fire Demon came for my brother it was only my own worthless life I prized. I ran very fast, but my head keep turning, turning—and I saw him die."

"Just how did he die, Chin?" Solo said. "Try to remember. Did you ever see the Fire Demon before?"

"Everyone has seen the Fire Demon," Chin Husan said. "He is as old as the human race."

"And he killed Sun Lin? With fire?"

Chin Husan shook his head. "Not with fire, no. He is all fire, but shaped like a man. Out of his mouth, ears, nostrils there comes nothing but fire. But it is not a fire that burns. He goes walking in the desert and he walks over you and —you die."

Illya Kuryakin gripped Solo's arm and whispered into his ear. "This is madness, of course. But he must have seen something that looked like a fiery giant. If you keep on questioning him we may get at the truth."

Solo nodded and tightened his grip on Chin Husan's arm. "Listen to me, Chin," he said. "What you have told us is very strange. We believe you, of course, but you have not told us why the Fire Demon goes walking in the desert. Why did he kill Sun Lin and spare you?"

"He did not spare me. I ran. He walked away into the darkness without seeing me at all."

"How do you know he didn't see you? Doesn't he have eyes?"

"He has eyes that look out across the world and ears that hear the whisper of the wind as it moves across the ocean a thousand miles away. To the Fire Demon we are too small to be seen unless he bends down and searches for us in the sand. When you walk through a forest there are thousands of insects which you hear but do not see. But if they are silent you neither see or hear them. I was silent when I ran."

"How long have the tribesmen of the Gobi thought of the Fire Demon in that way?" Solo asked, a rising excitement in his voice.

There was no change in Chin's voice when he said: "I do not know."

"I think you do," Solo said. "This is very important to us, Chin. It is something we must know. Your friends, your brothers—did they always think of the Fire Demon in that way?"

"In what way? I do not understand."

"As having eyes that can see what is taking place a great distance away. Do you know what a legend is, Chin?"

"I have heard your countrymen talk about legends," Chin Husan said. "For us there are no legends. We only believe in what is true."

"And the Fire Demon is true."

"I have said that he is."

"I'm afraid you may not understand me when I tell you that the Fire Demon is an ancient Chinese legend which goes back thousands of years, and he has been pictured as a—well, a kind of idol fifteen or twenty feet tall, walking about and breathing fire just as you've described him. But even if you don't completely understand I'd like you to think about it for a minute or two."

"I am an unlearned man. Is that what you're thinking?" Chin Husan said, with a trace of resentment in his voice. "It may be true, but why do you fling it in my face? I know what you are talking about."

"I'm sorry," Solo said. "But if you understand I am glad, because it makes it that much simpler. You know what the Fire Demon looks like. But when you say he can 'look out across the world' did you always think of him as being able to do that? As a child, I mean. And do your friends all think he can do that too? For how long, Chin? Since they were very young?"

"I do not think so," Chin Husan said. "It is very strange. When I was young the Fire Demon could see all of us. So we believed, and that is why we hoped we would never meet him walking in the desert.

"He can still see us if we make a noise and he looks down and searches for us. But how he looks far away and what he sees we cannot see at all. And what he hears we cannot hear at all."

The moon had come into clear view again and was bathing the rock structure in its departing radiance, which shone full upon Chin Husan's face. It brought his features into harsh relief and Solo suddenly realized that, even now, they were not the features of a completely sane man. There was a look of torment in his eyes and he seemed to be directing his guilt feelings in upon himself, for abruptly he raised his right fist and pounded his chest as if punishing himself for his cowardice in deserting Sun Lin.

Solo felt himself to be in no danger of another sudden attack. His concern was solely for Chin Husan's sanity and the harm which a half-demented man could do to himself if abruptly released from all restraint.

Chin Husan could hardly have been aware of what was passing through Solo's mind. But if he had known his sudden bid for freedom could not have been more violent or taken the two men from U.N.C.L.E. more completely by surprise.

With a display of wiry strength amazing in so old a man he wrenched both of his wrists free and left the moon-splotched shadows where he had been huddling in a flying leap.

The leap carried him straight out over the sand, and was exe-

cuted with so great a violence that it sent him sprawling. But almost instantly he was on his feet again, running wildly across the desert in the direction of the hollow where the vanished camels had spent the major part of the night. He encircled the hollow and ran on without looking back or uttering a sound.

ILLYA SEEMED the most shaken. "Who could have anticipated he'd try something like that?" Solo muttered. "His madness came back fast."

"Do you think we should go after him?" Kuryakin said.

"Only if we were as mad as he is," Solo said. "Then getting lost in the desert wouldn't matter much, one way or the other. He won't stop running for quite some time. We can search for him when the 'copter gets here, if he's still alive."

"Why don't you come right out and say it," Illya asked. "If *we're* still alive. Signaling the 'copter is going to be the first real test. If THRUSH can pick up a short wave, limited range message in triple-code in the middle of the Gobi Balkeley's disappearance may be followed by another vanishing act —staged by Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin."

"A THRUSH pickup of a transmitted S O S might be wholly unnecessary to accomplish that," Solo said. "You're forgetting that when Huntley and Rivers discussed something their voices on the headland and the two telecasts we saw in New York must have been picked up almost instantaneously, by some spot-coverage transmission mechanism that verges on the miraculous."

"But Newfoundland isn't quite as remote from the THRUSH-cell network as the middle of the Gobi," Illya reminded him.

"How do we know how remote the bedrock bottom of a Pacific Island volcano might be from some nightmare kind of eavesdropping mechanism?" Solo said. "The same kind of pickup impossibility may be at work here, changing it into the opposite of an impossibility. Could spoken words be picked up electronically half across the world? Think a moment before you rule that out. Television in its most primitive form was considered just as great an impossibility at the turn of the century."

He paused an instant, then went on grimly. "I've a feeling also that right now, *for us*, that pickup mechanism wouldn't have to be globe-encircling, that we're very close to its mysterious source. That's why I questioned Chin Husan so closely about the Fire Demon. His answers didn't tell me one-tenth of what I'd like to know. But they made something clearer I've given a great deal of thought to. In case you're interested, it's also on the nightmare level."

They heard the helicopter before they saw it. It was still high in the

sky and approaching from the east. For three full minutes they continued to hear it before it came into view as a tiny black dot against the dawn glow.

Gradually the dot grew larger and as it began to descend its aspect changed from that of an airborne gnat to a huge and ungainly insect with dangling appendages. Growing larger still it lost its insect-like appearance and became a flying windmill. Finally its whirlybird contours stood out distinctly. The cockpit glimmered in the dawn light and the metal helmets of the two pilots glittered with a diamond-like brilliance.

The helicopter was less than four hundred feet to the east of them now, and descending quite rapidly. But it had not quite reached a hovering position and seemed to be moving with a puzzling lack of stability. Solo thought for a moment that the pilots had manipulated the controls with insufficient precision high in the sky, and were endeavoring to correct a miscalculation that would have carried the 'copter a considerable distance beyond the tent area.

But it was hard to believe that pilots so experienced could have committed such a blunder, and his alarm increased when the 'copter began to sway and lurch violently.

It never reached a hovering position directly overhead. Instead it dipped with appalling suddenness, shot off at a tangent to its original course and went into so fast a vertical spin that its outlines became blurred for an instant.

It was still revolving when two sharp blasts put an end to the spinning, and a bright sheet of flame spurted skyward, accompanied by a billowing cloud of smoke.

Half the 'copter was aflame when it began to fall, with an incredible slowness at first and then with a speed that no aircraft less massive could have attained after being blasted down in midair.

It crashed to earth a hundred yards from where Solo and Kuryakin were standing, sending another sheet of flame spiraling skyward. So violent was the impact that a small earthquake seemed to pass over the desert, hurling them to the sand and stinging their nostrils with a spattering of micro-bullets composed entirely of sand.

When they struggled to their feet a pillar of smoke was arising from the shattered 'copter, laced with darting tongues of flame. But one of the pilots had managed to escape from the wreckage and was running straight toward them cross the sand.

It was difficult to imagine how he could have survived so fiery a holocaust with no more than a soot-scorched face and a slight limp which slowed him down a little as he ran. But in some miraculous way he had not only extricated himself from the wreckage, but

had suffered no injuries in the crash crippling enough to keep him from outdistancing the swiftly spreading flames.

He was gesturing to them as he ran, as if he had something to tell them of such vital importance that not even the terrible ordeal of struggling to save himself in time could blot it from his mind.

Illya Kuryakin was still too stunned by what had happened to move from where he stood. But Solo, while amost as stunned, managed to stagger forward until the distance between the advancing pilot and U.N.C.L.E.'s Number One operative had been considerably reduced.

"You're safe now," Solo shouted. "Better slow down or you'll be flat on your face. Even if another explosion comes—"

"That's what it was, an explosion!" the advancing pilot shouted, not heeding Solo's advice. "But it wasn't a flash-fire accident. We were fired upon!"

But that's impossible Solo thought, coming to an abrupt halt and waiting for the now slightly swaying man to join him. His waiting was in vain, because the runner's swaying increased and he began to lurch back and forth across the sand as erratically as the 'copter had done before the explosion had sent it crashing to the earth in flames.

There was a sudden, blinding flash and the running pilot rose eight feet into the air and went spinning back toward the still flaming wreckage. He screamed just once, piercingly, his lips writhing back from his teeth.

Solo could not see what it was that was bearing him backwards. But his face, where the soot had not blackened it, was a livid mask of terror, and it was easy to see that he was experiencing as well an almost unendurable agony.

There was another sudden flash and the pilot's spinning body flew apart in the air, as if some invisible force had shattered it. Instantly, gruesomely, severing the arms from the trunk, the legs at the knees, and causing the head to split open like a coconut dropped from a tree.

What was left of the body thudded to the sand a short distance from the wreckage and was almost as instantly enveloped in a swirl of smoke that continued on past it over the sand until it was halfway to where Solo was standing.

For an instant he had to fight against a threat he could not remember ever having experienced before—the danger of actually blacking out from shock alone. It did not surprise him too much. To witness so ghastly an execution at close range, with no warning, no chance at all to summon a danger-conditioned fortitude to one's aid held a degree of horror that made such a threat very real.

In the vicinity of the wreckage

the desert was strewn with still flaming debris, and the heat could be felt from where Napoleon Solo stood. But it wasn't the heat that caused him to take a few steps backward and blink furiously. It was the towering figure that had come suddenly into view a half mile beyond the wreckage, its vast bulk silhouetted against the sky and half blotting out the blazing sunlight.

It was moving slowly toward the wreckage. It was ablaze with many-colored lights which even the downstreaming sunlight failed to dim. It had an unmistakably oriental look. The arms were bent sharply at the elbows and were held well out from a body that seemed divided into segments that overlapped.

What looked like a gigantic stone turban enveloped the upper part of a head which was sharply angular and gleamed with a metallic luster as it swayed slowly back and forth.

Clearly Illya Kuryakin had seen it too, for Solo was aware of the younger man's harsh breathing a little to the left of him, and could hear the swish of his sandals as he moved about on the sand.

Gradually, as he stared, the figure grew dimmer, as if the newly arisen sun resented its presence and was reaching out with long arms of radiance to blot it from sight. It seemed to merge and blend with the sunlight as it went walking into the east.

TEN

THREE DESERT MAIDENS

THE HEAT was intolerable and the sun was a blazing red eye that seemed to follow Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin as they dragged themselves over the sand.

Not only had they lost their way in the desert—they had started out with no knowledge of what Sun Lin could have told them if he had been still alive. The Gobi was a man-killer.

Its monotony stripped it of all guideposts. Just as you felt you might be on the track of something—the recovered trail of a camel, perhaps—what you thought might be hoof-marks in parallel formation turned out to be wind-flurry indentations.

There were no big mirages to mislead them. Just little ones that were infinitely more misleading. They became illusion-tormented in slow stages. There would be moments when they seemed to be caressed by cool winds, encouraged by what they were quite sure were distant but encouraging voices, urging them not to abandon hope, promising them a reward for their efforts.

Illya was the first to collapse. He did it without complaining, without uttering a single word of protest. He simply stopped dragging himself forward, sank level with the sand and lay still. Solo blacked out a few minutes later.

* * *

THREE DESERT maidens, their faces veiled in morning mist, were tripping lightly over the Gobi sands. Three desert maidens, arm in arm, their long yellow robes flowing out over the sand.

Only—there was something wrong. All three of the maidens looked exactly alike. They had the same eyes, the same high cheekbones, the same facial pallor.

Solo had seen each of the three faces—or one face—before. But not in the Gobi. Somewhere far away in another world. But how could three Gobi maidens look so enchantingly beautiful, when behind them loomed gray buildings that had nothing whatever to do with the Gobi and should not have been there at all?

Tall gray buildings and hurrying New York faces tight with strain. A long gray limousine moving slowly through a canyon of stone. Against such a background, how could three lovely maidens maintain their poise and trip so gracefully over the sand? How could their faces fail to mirror something of that same strain?

"Wake up, Napoleon Solo," a voice that was all music seemed to whisper deep in Solo's mind. "This is Lhasa. We meet for the second time, under circumstances which have greatly changed. You have been delirious for hours. But it is important for you to know that many things have changed—so that you will not think that you are in the presence of an enemy."

The voice ceased for an instant, then went on again. "When a man has endured almost more than the human mind can bear, it would be cruel beyond belief to let him go on thinking that he is still in deadly

danger. So long as you remain here you will be in danger. But it is not immediate, you are completely safe for the moment. Try to understand that. It will set your mind at rest, and make your awakening less of a torment."

The three desert maidens drew suddenly closer to one another, their linked arms tightening as they danced. And suddenly they seemed to merge and blend, to coalesce and run together until there remained just one enchantingly radiant maiden in a long yellow robe tripping gracefully over the Gobi sand.

Napoleon Solo opened his eyes.

Ebony black and immense was the first object that met his eyes. It towered in one corner of an enormous room in which many screens, set at oblique angles, glowed tranpatent in the light of a flickering fire. The ebony black object was a statue, and Solo gradually realized it was a somonolent Buddha, with features slightly smiling.

Upon the screens—there were eight of them in all—long red dragons writhed, with their tongues darting fire. There was a brazier directly opposite the Buddha and from its glowing coals a thin ribbon of smoke coiled.

There were rich oriental rugs on the floor and hanging lamps as well which shed a mellow amber radiance over their intricate designs.

"Napoleon Solo, look at me," the voice that was all music pleaded. "At me—not at this room, which pleases my father but gives me no pleasure."

She was kneeling at his side, and since he was on his side, staring straight across the room toward the opposite wall it was not strange that he had failed to be aware of her presence until her voice came to his ears.

Napoleon rolled over on his back and then sideway again until he was staring directly into her eyes. His head whirled for an instant, from weakness or dizziness perhaps, and he had to blink furiously to bring her features into sharp relief.

For an instant the tall gray buildings seemed to come sweeping back, but he knew now that they were solely an illusion and that he was not within walking distance of the United Nations. If he remained calm only the room and the woman at his side would remain.

"You have been out of your mind for hours, Napoleon Solo," she said. "You woke up once, but you did not recognize me. But you must have seen my face in your dreams, for you talked wildly about our meeting in New York.

"It was a tragic meeting and one that I now regret. I threatened you, warned you what would happen to U.N.C.L.E when your every move became known to us in advance."

"But why—"

"Wait," she said, laying two

fingers on his lips, and bending so slow above him that her breath fanned his face. "Let me finish and then you can talk. I have much to tell you."

She paused an instant, her eyes almost feverishly bright. "My father you saw on New York," she went on quickly. "He is Lee Cheng. But he is not a THRUSH agent."

The name was unfamiliar to Solo but it brought an instant question to his lips. "Lee Chang—your father? You mean that frail little man who turned and fled back toward the car when I was forced to make sure that you were not carrying a concealed weapon? The other two were not old enough—"

"He is neither frail nor little in his mind. He invented what you have come to the Gobi to investigate and, if possible, destroy. It is a machine that can move about in the desert and pick up what is said and done by an isolated human target thousands of miles away. It can penetrate all walls, listen and record what has been said and send televisual images just as far."

Lhasa's voice took on a more vibrant intensity. "It is—yes, a kind of Frankenstein monster. Soulless, lifeless, except for the terrible kind of artificial life that my father has endowed it with. Nothing remotely like it has ever been developed before. It is a machine of a thousand eyes, a thousand ears. And my father would use it to dominate and enslave the world and restore the ancient glories of our race. There should be no need for me to remind you how great was the glory of China thousands of years before Western civilizations rose and fell."

"But if your father—"

"Wait," she insisted, her voice suddenly almost pleading. "I have more to tell you. There is little about you that I do not know, Napoleon Solo. I watched you often through the all-seeing eyes of that machine, both before we met in New York and afterwards. Sometimes I could not see you at all, because it goes blind at times, completely blind, and records nothing that my father and THRUSH would like it to see and hear. Deaf and blind. It happens often. But my father is working night and day to perfect it."

"Your father and THRUSH. But you just said that he was not a THRUSH agent."

"I asked you to be patient, to hear me out. If you will listen, you will understand. Your battle so far has been entirely with THRUSH. And your suspicions have not been wide of the mark. THRUSH is making use of my father's invention in an attempt to destroy U.N.C.L.E and increase its criminal power a hundredfold. But THRUSH does not know what my father's secret plans are. When the right time comes he will supplant THRUSH. He will be the all-powerful one. But now he must pretend that it is quite other-

wise. He has always been a poor man and without the support which THRUSH gave him—"

"He has agreed to work with THRUSH to destroy U.N.C.L.E. is that it?" Solo asked.

"Yes, and I have helped him. It is I who have been a THRUSH agent. I am a unit commander, I have been entrusted with important secrets. But all of that is of no consequence when it is balanced against what is happening now."

Solo waited for her to continue, feeling suddenly confident that no further questions would be needed. She was clearly going to tell him everything he had to know. The intensity of her gaze confirmed it and the almost pleading look in her eyes.

"Three things," she went on quickly, "have made it necessary for me to take drastic measures to oppose both THRUSH and my father's secret plans. First, THRUSH no longer trusts me. My failure in New York and my inability to keep you from reaching the Gobi has made them turn against me. The penalty for that kind of failure could be death."

"I see," Solo said, nodding. "And the other two reasons?"

"Do not misjudge me," she said. "I would race death gladly if it would help to save my father. But even if I succeeded in getting THRUSH to go on trusting me, my father's life would still hang in the balance. And the scales are tipping dangerously against him. He had become reckless, headstrong, blind to all caution. He is moving much too fast. If his mask of pretence drops, and it could at any moment, THRUSH will destroy him. Instantly —because to them he is nothing but a pawn. When once his invention is perfected—"

Her hand tightened on Solo's wrist. "His ambition to become the dominant one has made him lose contact with reality. I can no longer advise or control him. My pleadings fall on deaf ears. He is not only working to perfect the electronic monster that U.N.C.L.E. must find a way to destroy—but he has invented another, smaller but just as destructive Frankenstein-like giant. It is solely an instrument of death, for it can send a lethal ray half as far as the televisual pickups that make the larger mechanical giant a civilization-destroying threat. It would be less destructive on a global scale, but it is frightful enough, and he is planning to use it against THRUSH."

"Good God," Solo breathed. "How—how close is he to perfecting it."

"I do not know," the woman at his side said. "He has kept that a secret, even from me. But I'm convinced that THRUSH may destroy him at any moment. I'm sure they suspect more than he knows, or will allow himself to believe. As I've said, he is deaf and blind to all caution. He has no way of finding

out just how much THRUSH suspects when the machine's eavesdropping mechanism breaks down, and that has occurred often."

"Where is this new invention now?" Solo asked. "Is he working on it here?"

The woman at his side nodded. "Yes, right here in the ruins."

"The ruins?"

"We are in the ruins of an ancient Gobi temple," she said. "With money supplied by THRUSH my father has converted it into a series or connecting laboratories and workshops. It was once a holy place. But it is not so holy now, for THRUSH has seen to that. We have had five THRUSH visitors just in the past month. They fear that what happened in New York may be repeated here. You and your friend Illya Kuryakin outwitted them at every turn. They never thought you would get so far. Your arrival has greatly alarmed them."

The mention of Illya's name made Solo forget everything else for a moment. His concern for the safety of Kuryakin had been continuously on his mind from the first. But he had forced himself to remain silent about it, considering it wiser to wait until the woman at his side had told him enough to convince him that a display of concern would be of more benefit than harm to Illya. A premature question would have been an act of folly and what he had to guard against most of all was changing a talkative woman into a suspiciously silent one.

But now he felt that the question could be safely asked.

"Where is Kuryakin?" he said. "You haven't told me how we got here. If anything has happened to him—"

"I told you that I wished only to set your mind at rest," the woman at his side said, before he could go on. "My father found you both wandering in the desert and had you brought here. You were delirious, raving, barely able to drag yourselves along. It was my father who directed the attack which brought the helicopter which came to your rescue down in flames, from here by remote control. The electronic eavesdropping machine is equipped also with electronic weapons of deadly accuracy and range.

"You would have been killed if it had not stopped functioning shortly after it brought the plane down. That is one of the defects which my father is working night and day to overcome."

Lhasa paused, to stare at him steadily for a moment. "Your friend is safe," she said. "My father is not being too kind to him, because he does not wish to displease THRUSH at this point. There are certain questions he must ask the very stubborn Mr. Kuryakin. But I have protected you from all that, and I intend to go on doing so. My father, whatever he may be-

lieve, is not yet all-powerful here."

She continued to stare at him steadily, her eyes seeming to veil more than they revealed.

"I said there were three things, Napoleon Solo, that made it necessary for me to take drastic measures to oppose both THRUSH and my father's secret plans. You know now what two of them are. But you have not questioned me about the third."

"And what is the third?" Solo asked.

"I told you that I have watched you often through the all-seeing eyes of the machine, Napoleon Solo. Despite myself, I have come to respect and admire you. I will strike a bargain with you. If I can find a way that will enable both you and Mr. Kuryakin to escape from the ruins before it is too late—will you promise me that you will not forget what I have just told you? THRUSH has become my father's enemy? At any moment the blow may fall. The instant they cease to need him he will be destroyed. Only you can save him. If U.N.C.L.E. can strike first my father's life may be spared. Surely if I help you to escape U.N.C.L.E., out of gratitude alone, would rest content with so shattering a blow to THRUSH."

The proposal was so unexpected that Solo remained for an instant silent, turning it over in his mind. Such a promise, he knew, would have to be conditional. Lee Cheng

could not possibly escape the exaction which justice would demand—life imprisonment, at the very least. The frail little man's Frankenstein monster had been used as an instrument of death, and while justice could be tempered with mercy it could not be toppled from its pedestal by bargaining on any level.

Neither was it anything that Solo would have cared to attempt. Lee Cheng's guilt, would not be lessened by the repentance of his daughter—if her repentance was genuine—or by her offer of help.

He was very careful to make his answer non-committal and reassuring. "I'll do my best," he said.

"Then I will do my best," the woman at his side said quickly, a gleam of relief coming into her

eyes, "to arrange for your escape. It will be difficult and may take a little time."

Solo was far from sharing her relief. What she had said about Illya was causing him increasing concern. "My father is not being too kind to him" could have meant more than the words suggested. It could have veiled an ordeal by torture that Illya might not be able to withstand.

"There should be no conditions attached to the kind of bargain we have just made," Solo said. "Kuryakin has risked his life more than once to save mine. You can hardly expect me to be unconcerned as to his safety."

"I know," Lhasa said, meeting his gaze with more understanding than he had dared to hope he would see in her eyes. "But what would you have me do? Take you to him? It would be difficult and dangerous. He is under constant guard."

"But you could do it, I think," Solo said. "I would just exchange a few words with him. It's important to me. I must be absolutely sure that he is all right. You just said—"

"I know what I said. But that does not mean that all of the guards will obey me, or even that I can trust more than three of four of them not to betray me. Why can't you believe me when I tell you that Kuryakin is in no immediate danger?"

"That depends on what you mean by danger," Solo said. "He may be in more danger than you know. Not of losing his life perhaps, but—" He let what he could have said remain unspoken.

For an instant Lhasa returned his stare almost defiantly. Then she shrugged. "All right," she said. "I'll take you to him."

ELEVEN

GOBI SOS

IN AMERICA it would not have been thought of as a room, but as a warehouse interior of an arsenal supply depot.

The walls were of stone, but they had an almost metallic sheen and they towered up into shadows. Long benches stood against the walls and one stood a little out from the wall and extended from the doorway to a far corner where a huge pile of miscellaneous objects lay scattered—steel helmets, gunbelts, canteens and what looked like a collapsed parachute.

On all of the benches there were metallically gleaming instruments of science. Their technological configuration was apparent at a glance, although some were much larger than others.

But it wasn't the instruments of science, nor the scattered objects of desert warfare equipment that were half-obscured by the shadows that caused Solo to come to an abrupt

halt just inside the doorway and draw in his breath sharply. The woman at his side had shut the door firmly behind them and was watching his face intently, as if she feared that just the sight of the half-naked man strapped from his waist to his shoulders by leather thongs to one of the benches might cause Solo to turn upon her in rage.

Illya Kryakin's back was crisscrossed with swelling welts, and he was moving his shoulders about, as far as the thongs would permit, as if to ease the pain of what could only have been recently applied lashes.

"You lied to me!" Solo breathed. "You said that no harm would come to him."

"I did not know," she said, "that my father would—"

Lhasa straightened abruptly, a look of alarm coming into her eyes. They had both heard it, a sudden, clattering sound just outside the door that had barely closed behind them.

"That guard!" she said. "I'm not sure I can trust him. I did not like the look he gave me when I ordered him to leave. He may be waiting just outside. I'd better make sure—"

She had opened the door again and was gone before Napoleon Solo could move across the enormous room toward Illya Kuryakin.

"There's a bolt on that door!" Illya cried out sharply. "Lower it into place. Don't let her come back. Hurry! We'll never get another chance."

It seemed sheer madness to Solo, for what chance could two unarmed men possibly have in a room that was securely bolted? But he turned, grasped the bolt firmly and let it clatter into place, then crossed the enormous room in ten swift strides to Illya's side.

"Unbind me," Illya said, ignoring the appalled look on Solo's face as his eyes came to rest on the ten or twelve long red welts that crisscrossed the younger agent's back. They had cut deeply into the flesh, and it was easy to see from the tight set of Illya's lips that the pain was still agonizing.

"There's a powerful transmitting apparatus at the end of this bench," Kuryakin said. "Get me loose and we'll put through a message to Harris in Tokyo and Waverly in New York. It won't be picked up, because Lee Cheng's metal giant is lying immobilized in the desert close to where it brought the 'copter down. It developed another defect right after we caught a brief look at it."

Solo began swiftly to loosen the thongs which bound Illya to the bench, talking as he did so, his voice tight with strain.

"How did you find out all that? I had a very good chance to get some information just as vital, but I seem to have muffed it. Cheng's daughter—"

"She's a very talkative girl,"

Illya said. "But I guess you know that. She was here, along with her father. He finally lost patience and presented me with a souvenir of this place I'll be carrying with me for some time. Twelve lashes, straight across the back, with a very ugly cat. But trying to get vital information out of a man that way can backfire. He had to give me some information so that I could fill in the rest of it for him, which of course I refused to do."

For an instant Illya's lips twisted in a wry smile, despite his pain. "He thought it was safe enough to let a few things slip out, because he didn't think I'd ever leave this room alive."

"Are you sure you will?" Solo asked. "Even if we get a message through to Tokyo and New York, there's a long road of winding before any help could get here."

"That's what Lhasa said," Illya replied, the smile returning to his lips for the barest instant before the last thong fell away. "She's quite a girl. More loyal to her father than to THRUSH. But for awhile, apparently, THRUSH didn't begin to suspect that.

"She took command in New York, but her father's danger made her turn against THRUSH."

"Lhasa," Solo said. "I didn't even think to ask her her name. Did she say she respected and admired you too?"

"To some extent. But think nothing of it. It goes with that kind of talkativeness, when there's something of importance to be gained by it."

"That's what you think," Solo said. "All right, we'll send those messages. First to Harris and then to Waverly. Maybe they can tell us something we don't know—that will give us a straw to clutch at. We could sure use one. They'll be clattering at that door any minute now."

Illya nodded and swayed a little as he moved toward the end of the bench. Solo saw the transmitting apparatus then, for the first time. It was huge and looked powerful. He hoped that it was as powerful as it looked.

"You know how to operate it, of course."

"I don't think I'll have any trouble," Kuryakin said. "It's stripped down and looks efficient. I imagine it has a very powerful beam. Would you like to send the messages?"

"It's all yours," Solo said. "But for God's sake be quick about it."

It took Illya Kuryakin only a minute to groove it to the right wave length. Once it was grooved in, the ground pulses began to operate continuously and Harris' voice in Tokyo came in precisely two minutes later.

Illya spoke briefly for another minute, filling Harris in as completely as that brief time interval permitted and what Harris said in reply Solo could not hear. He could

only hope that it wasn't too tragically depressing.

Kuryakin turned briefly to nod at Solo. "Now Waverly," he said. "What I just heard will rock you back on your heels."

Solo could only hope that it wasn't an exaggeration.

For two or three more minutes Illya remained bent over the transmitting apparatus. His hand had moved again swiftly and had then remained stationary.

Suddenly he turned from the instrument and shook his head. "I can't contact Waverly," he said. "He's not in the office or anywhere in the building. But there was no real need for me to try and get him, in view of what Harris told me. Rescue is on the way, if we can hold out until it gets here."

"But that makes no sense to me," Solo said. "How could such a thing be possible? The 'copter—"

"It was blasted down and you thought that U.N.C.L.E had no further resources at its command in the Gobi. But that's where you're mistaken. Do you think Harris would have sent us here with no replacements?"

"You mean he didn't tell us?"

"There are some things Waverly apparently seems to feel it's wise to keep a secret, even from Napoleon Solo," Illya said. "He told Harris but not us. Another U.N.C.L.E. 'copter is on its way here, yes. And it's carrying a bomb load we can drop on Lee Cheng's eavesdropping giant. If—and it's a big 'if', of course—we can stay alive until it gets here."

"But how did they know where we were?" Solo asked. "If they've started out already—"

"Harris says it was easy. U.N.C.L.E.'s Tokyo unit picked up a telecast from the giant, precisely as U.N.C.L.E in the United States picked up that Newfoundland telecast. An erratic, very short, freak telecast. Right after it blew another electronic tube, perhaps for the hundredth time."

Kuryakin smiled grimly. "They even saw us dragging ourselves over the sand and collapsing. Then the giant collapsed and the telecast flickered out."

"If we can stay alive until the 'copter gets here," Solo said. "That's a big order."

"It may not be too big to fill," Illya said. "If we keep our wits about us. What do you suppose is keeping Lhasa from coming back? I'd give a lot to know."

The sudden rattling of the door made it almost seem as if Illya's words had been overheard by some mysterious imp of the perverse bent on startling them.

Solo swung about, strode to the door and unlatched it. He opened it only a few inches. But when he saw Lhasa's pale, agitated face framed in the aperture he opened it wide enough to admit her, then quickly closed and latched it again.

She remained for an instant close

to the door, staring at Solo and Illya with a stricken look on her face. "My father knows," she said. "That guard betrayed me. He also knows you sent two scrambled messages to Tokyo and New York. There's a recording device attached to the transmitter. He has the messages, but that combined range-finder and recorder just reproduced what you said without unscrambling it. And what was said to you from Tokyo. How long should it take him to unscramble both messages?"

"Not more than ten minutes," Solo said. "They were not coded messages. Kuryakin spoke directly to our agent in Tokyo. But there was some scrambling, which was straightened out instantly at the other end. It may take your father a little longer, unless the recording device has some very specialized instruments."

"There's probably nothing he hasn't got," Illya muttered. He moved quickly to Lhasa's side and gripped her by the arm. "Your father will be here the instant he unscrambles those messages," he said. "Is that what you're trying to tell us?"

"Yes, and he will not spare you," Lhasa cried, the wild look that had been absent for a moment returning to her eyes. He will kill you both. He killed your Mr. Blakeley over there by that table." She gestured wildly. "I did my best to protect him, as I would have protected Napoleon Solo. But he was just as stubborn and reckless. He insulted my father to his face—"

Lhasa stared at Solo. "You must go before it is too late. There may still be time. My father still trusts me, although not as completely as before. I lied to him explained that I had reason to believe that if you were together here for a few minutes your conversation would be worth recording. He knows how skilled I am at eavesdropping and I think he believed me. But I can't be sure."

She swung about abruptly and pointed toward the shadowed corner where the desert warfare equipment had been piled up.

"There are several holstered pistols there," she said. "Strap two of them to your waist. As soon as you are in the inner courtyard start running—straight through the outer courtyard into the desert. You may be stopped, but it is a chance you must take. I would have planned your escape quite differently if I had had just a few hours—"

She paused an instant, then went on breathlessly. "The temple is in ruins. There are crumbling blocks of stone everywhere, a protection against bullets if you weave about and move in and out of the shadows."

Solo nodded and strode quickly to the equipment-cluttered corner of the enormous room. He picked up a gun-belt, strapped it to his waist and hurled another toward

Illya Kuryakin, who had moved almost as quickly into the shadows.

Illya caught it and lost no time in buckling it around his slender hips.

Lhasa had unbolted the door and was standing a little to the left of it when they returned across the room to her side.

"You must hurry," she warned.

Solo had unbolted the door and was passing into the stone-walled passageway beyond when she clutched him firmly by the arm.

"Remember your promise," she pleaded. "My father is lost to all reason now. His death will be certain unless the destruction of both machines makes THRUSH abandon all thought of removing him the instant his usefulness ends. Only U.N.C.L.E has the means of accomplishing that. In utter defeat THRUSH will lose all interest in a pawn that has failed them."

It flashed across Solo's mind that in defeat THRUSH might take a vital interest in a man who might still be capable of rebuilding a destroyed Frankenstein monster. But he saw no reason for calling that to her attention.

TWELVE

THE DEATH-RAY MONSTER

A STIFF WIND had arisen, stirring the palms on both sides of the inner courtyard, hazing the sky with a curtain of blowing sand.

Solo and Illya broke into a run, the long-barreled guns jogging at their hips.

They saw no one until they were two-thirds of the way across the courtyard. Then a shaven-headed giant with a gleaming sword in his hand, his head a mottled blur in the half-light, barred their passage. He had leapt out of the shadows and stood directly in their path, his silken trousers blooming out on both sides of his knees. The trousers and shaven head gave him more the aspect of some huge-statured, evil jinni from the *Arabian Nights* than a Chinese armed guard with a red dragon at his back.

The dragon was made of porcelain, but the huge guard was not. He swung the sword back and forth as if he wished to demonstrate how easy it would be for him to cut off Solo's head and when neither Solo nor Illya stopped running advanced upon them, still swinging the mammoth sword.

Solo waited until he was very close before he tugged his pistol from its holster, steadied it carefully and drew just as careful a bead on the advancing guard's midsection.

He fired. The pistol leapt in his hand as it roared, and the guard bent double, then went staggering back against the red porcelain dragon and toppled sideways to the sand.

The shot brought two other guards rushing into the courtyard to avenge their fallen comrade. Luckily they were much smaller men, and Illya Kuryakin had no difficulty in disarming the nearest one by ripping his sword from his clasp and burying it to the hilt in the sand. While the sword vibrated like a tuning fork he gripped the still enraged guard by the back of the neck, and brought his forehead down forcibly on the heavy jeweled handle of the sword three times.

The guard crumpled with the groan to the sand and Illya was spared the need of stopping the remaining guard in the same way, for Solo did it with dispatch by bringing the barrel of his pistol into forceful contact with the man's shaven head.

Almost instantly a fourth guard appeared, his naked torso matted with coarse black hair. He was almost as huge as the Jinni-like guard but his features were not of oriental cast. But his nationality did not interest Illya at all. He was only concerned with the length and rapidity of his stride as he advanced and his wise refusal to slash at the air with his sword. The weapon was pointed directly at Illya's chest, and Illya was quite sure that he could not save himself simply by leaping aside.

His hand darted to his hip. But before he could draw and fire another shot rang out a few feet to the left of him. The sword fell from the huge Caucasian's hand and a red gleaming appeared on his chest

just above his heart. The rage went out of his eyes. He fell to his knees and then forward on his face, a thin ribbon of blood trickling from beneath his right shoulder over the sand.

Illya turned and saw Solo, the still smoking gun in his hand. They encountered no more guards, as they passed through the outer courtyard to the desert without slowing down.

They were a hundred feet from the ruin, still running, when a machine-pistol started blasting away at them. Looking back, they could see the small, birdlike figure of Lee Cheng perched on a crumbling ledge of stone high above the outer courtyard, the heavy weapon buckling as he fired.

And something else was standing there, immense and shining and misshapen that resembled a hunchbacked giant. It towered at the frail little man's side, and was swaying back and forth, and suddenly as Solo and Kuryakin stared Lee Cheng stopped firing the machine-pistol and moved quickly up behind it.

They saw his hands moving up and down, frantically as if in despair of getting it to stop swaying and then back he leapt to the machine-pistol and started firing again.

"It's his second invention " Solo breathed, gripping Illya by the arm. "Lhasa told me about it—a death-ray machine! He must have mounted it on that ledge, hoping he could get it to work. But he wouldn't be using that machine-pistol if he was really sure of succeeding."

"I know," Illya said, shocked horror in his voice. "She told me about it too. If it does work—"

Tiny geysers of sand arose on the desert almost at their feet, and they could hear the whine of the bullets above the whispering of the wind that was stirring the sand in a less violent way.

Illya Kuryakin had leapt back, his face drained of all color, but Solo did not think it was the bullets that had caused him to break off so abruptly.

For the barest instant the firing stopped again and they saw that Lee Cheng had leapt back behind the giant.

It was Solo who finished what Illya had started to say." If it does work we're done for. Make no mistake about that. But Lhasa didn't know how near he's come to perfecting it. We're almost out of range of the bullets, so if we keep on running we may have a chance—"

They had barely started to turn when it happened.

Lee Cheng had just started to move back toward the machine-pistol when the giant-like shape of metal on the ledge gave a violent lurch sideways and crashed down on top of him.

They could see his frail body

flatten beneath the impact of its enormous bulk and flatten still more as it went spinning out over the far end of the ledge, caught in a wedge of flying metal that had broken loose from the metal giant and was contracting like a giant claw.

The giant remained on the ledge for an instant after Lee Cheng started to fall, if some mechanism had been set into motion that was causing it to jerk erratically about. Then it followed its maker over the ledge, falling so rapidly that it struck the sand a hundred feet below ahead of him, and burst into flames.

Lee Cheng's body thudded to the sand and turned over three times. Each turn brought him nearer to the flames and suddenly he was swallowed up in a roaring inferno that swept across the desert for two hundred feet in both directions, blotting most of the ruins from view.

"That was the last thing—" Illya began, but stopped when he saw the look in Solo's eyes.

"Come on," Solo said, in a voice that was oddly toneless. "We've got to keep moving. Lhasa will have to be taken into custody eventually, but that's not important now. With her fear of THRUSH she'll stay where she is—an isolated survivor with all hope of escape blocked. U.N.C.L.E will have no problem there, if we are lucky enough to succeed in destroying Lee Cheng's electronic giant."

THIRTEEN

THE DESERT TARGET

THE HELICOPTER CAME sweeping down toward them over the desert, descending quite low before it began its hovering vertical descent.

Five minutes later they were in the cockpit, watching the wide waste of sand two hundred feet below vanish in the wake of the plane.

The pilots were both youngsters in their early twenties. But they were good at their job. It was evidenced not only by the assured way they handled the controls, but by the skill and precision of their landing and takeoff and the look of alert appraisal in their eyes as they gazed out across the miles of desert that separated the crumbling ruin from a target marked now for total destruction.

Quick and total destruction—nothing else would do. An immobilized giant of metal and glass with the lightning at its fingertips could, at any moment, be aroused from its mechanical slumber.

In London, Paris, Tokyo more than one THRUSH finger might be capable of re-activating by remote control the complex stimulus-response circuits which had enabled the gigantic mechanism to both eavesdrop and bring a plane down in flames. If the giant could be saved from destruction there was

nothing to prevent THRUSH from mastering all of those complexities and eliminating every flaw in its functioning.

There was a strained uneasiness in Solo's voice when he spoke to the tight-lipped young pilot. "A few miles at the most now," he said. "Keep a sharp lookout for a sudden rise in the sand. We could be over

it so fast we'd just catch the glint of sunlight on metal."

"We can always circle around and go back," the pilot said. "But I doubt if we'll miss it."

The grim possibility that it might be the 'copter which would be missing before its target swept into view flashed across Solo's mind. But he dismissed it.

That all four men shared the mounting tension became apparent when the pilot sitting next to Illya Kuryakin said something that was totally irrelevant.

"The Sahara can't hold a candle to the Gobi as a trouble spot this time of year. The sandstorms are blinding and can rip you apart or bury you easily in less than ten minutes."

"I should think giant-size deserts would be about the same in that respect," Solo said, to keep his own tension from rising. "But the Gobi is special in other ways, as it didn't take us long to discover."

"Anything that THRUSH takes an interest in is likely to be special," the pilot next to Solo said.

It was then that they saw it. It lay sprawled out in a hundred foot hollow in the sand, glittering and immense and startlingly manlike, with a great bulbous head encased in a web of metal beneath which colored lights were blinking on and off. Its arms were segmented, its legs cylindrical.

Solo could see at a glance why in his first glimpse of it its resemblance to a Chinese fire demon had been so pronounced. To an unbelieved complex assemblage of scientific mechanisms Lee Cheng had attached ornamental embellishments which were unmistakable far Eastern in motif, perhaps because his ancestral heritage had made it impossible for him to resist an unconscious impulse to mock all Western science while making use of it to achieve his purpose. Or perhaps—and that seemed more likely—he had made the gigantic Frankenstein monster of technology resemble a fire demon to awe any Gobi native who chanced to encounter it.

For an instant, as the 'copter swept over the hollow, there was no movement visible below except the lights blinking on and off. That was startling and unexpected enough, however, and it caused the four men in the cockpit to exchange apprehensive glances.

Their alarm increased when the 'copter circled about and recrossed the hollow at a lower altitude, for by then the giant had begun to stir and raise itself from the sand.

Solo's voice rang out sharply. "The bombs! Circle back once more and drop all three of them the instant you're over the hollow. Don't try for a hovering position. There isn't time."

The two pilots leaned sharply forward and jerked at the controls. The whirlibird circled about, more widely this time and sank lower, re-

turning toward the hollow with increasing speed.

It was almost at the hollow's rim when the jolt came, throwing both pilots violently forward and causing the 'copter to sway and vibrate. Illya Kuryakin was hurled to his knees, but Napoleon Solo managed to remain in his seat despite the swaying, by bending instantly backwards and tightening his grip on the metal arms of the chair.

Instantly he realized that he must do more. Lowering himself quickly he succeeded from a kneeling position in getting at the bomb release. The 'copter continued on across the hollow and was directly over the rising giant when three small black eggs dropped from its belly.

It was fifty feet beyond the hollow when the explosions came, in one continuous, deafening roar that lasted for a full minute.

When the din subsided the 'copter was two hundred feet beyond the hollow, much higher in the air and no longer swaying.

Kuryakin had climbed back into his seat, looking a little shaken, and the two pilots were once more in full control.

It was Solo who was the first to speak. "It should take a few minutes for the smoke to clear. We may as well go a little higher before we circle back."

When the 'copter finally returned to go into a hovering position directly above the hollow, they discovered the shattering damage which had taken place.

Hardly anything was left of Lee Cheng's electronic, eavesdropping giant. A few scattered fragments of metal, a splintered breastplate from which all the antenna had been ripped—it was just a hollow shell—and some smoke-blackened tangles of wire were strewn across the hollow at uneven intervals. Almost all of the glass had disappeared. Here and there were a few crystalline lumps that glittered in the harsh, downstreaming sunlight.

Napoleon Solo grunted. "If THRUSH can make anything out of that they're welcome to it. It's a relief to know that we can now talk our heads off without the slightest danger of being overheard. The Gobi may be a trouble spot this time of year. But New York is at its best now—crisp autumn weather, banners unfurled, Fifth Avenue bright with clicking heels."

"Or blondes, brunettes and redheads," Illya Kuryakin said. "Mr. Waverly is going to be very happy, Napoleon, and that's not entirely incidental. Or is it?"

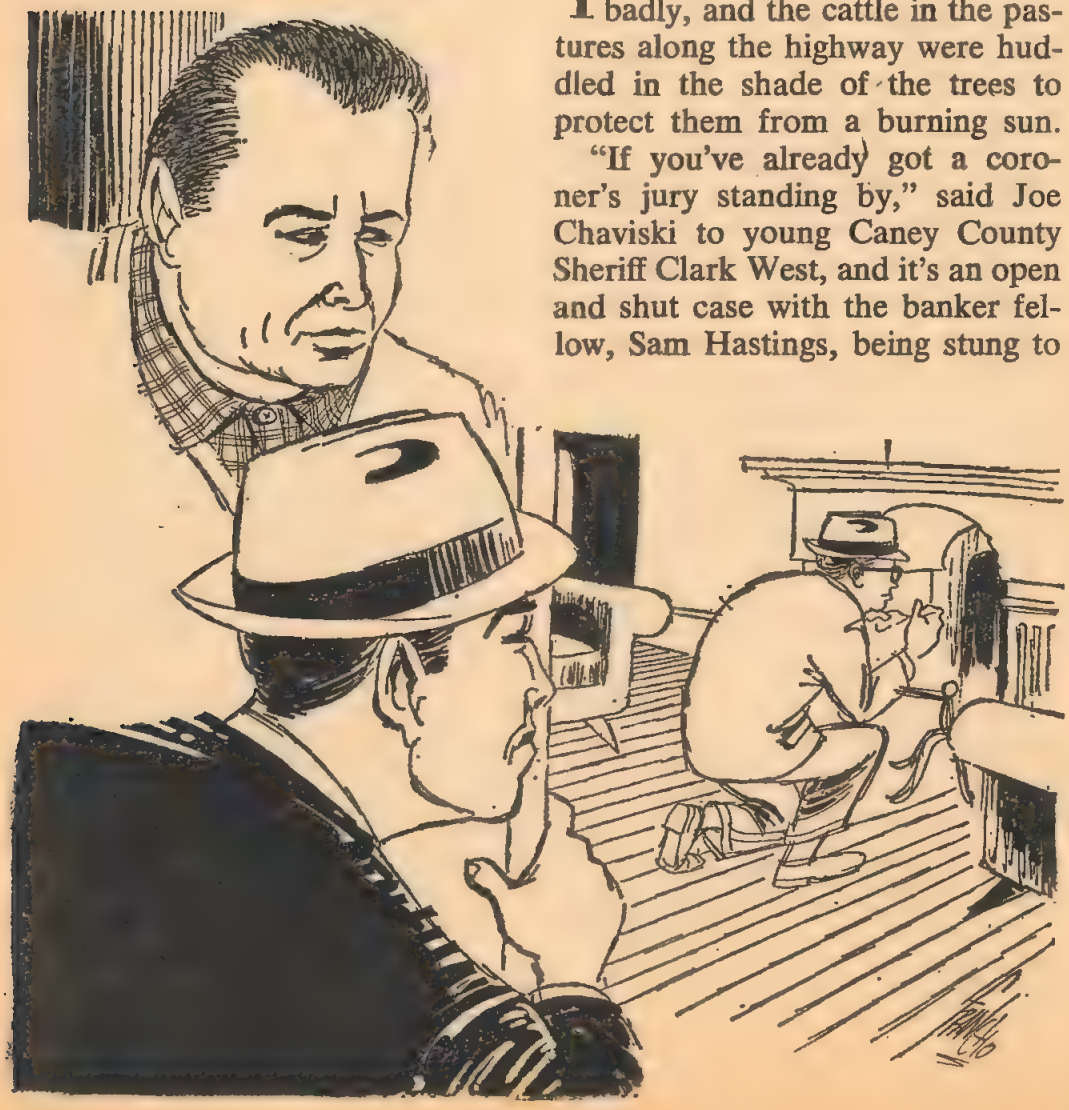
"I guess not entirely," Solo said.

Ten minutes later the whirlybird was winging its way south.

The Wasp Nest

He died hard, the banker. Hard and alone. Only one could know the grim answer to the buzzing in the roof—wings of a terrible death!

by
EDWIN P. HICKS



THE COUNTRYSIDE needed rain badly, and the cattle in the pastures along the highway were huddled in the shade of the trees to protect them from a burning sun.

"If you've already got a coroner's jury standing by," said Joe Chaviski to young Caney County Sheriff Clark West, and it's an open and shut case with the banker fellow, Sam Hastings, being stung to

death by wasps, why did you come and get me?"

"Because," West grinned, "I've been sheriff only since January one, and you've had many years of experience as a detective. And because Hasting's boss, William Slattery, was one of my most influential supporters when I was running for office. It might not be an open and shut case—it just mightn't. Besides, you're a fisherman."

"Being a fisherman hasn't got a thing in the world to do with it," said Chaviski. "Come on, level with me. What kind of a guy was Hastings? And what about young Slattery? I've known Slattery, senior, down through the years, but I don't know the boy."

"Hastings was along about fifty-five, a cashier at Slattery's bank. Always seemed like a good guy to me. Widower, his wife died three years ago. Kids all grown and live in California. No bad habits that I know of. Well off. Made some good investments down through the years. I understand he was planning to retire within a few months and go live with his children. All around fine citizen as far as I know."

"What about this wasp stinging business?"

"Couple of years before his wife died, Hastings was stung once and would have died if Doctor Farmington hadn't got to him in time. Doc rushed him to a hospital in your town, Fort Sanders. Had a devil of a time bringing him around. One wasp sting and it nearly cost him his life. Think of that! Dr. Farmington's the best doctor we got in town. He also is doing mighty well for himself—owns a new drugstore, and is building a clinic, a sort of hospital. Heavens knows we need one."

"Okay, okay," said Joe Chaviski, "so Hastings is dead and clear. So where does young Bill Slattery fit into the picture?"

"Bill called Dr. Farmington shortly before noon from up at the Slattery cabin on Cedar Creek—or rather from a farm house up near there. He and Hastings had gone fishing, and when young Bill returned to the cabin, there was poor old Sam on the floor, and he had been stung to death by wasps. Doc called me, and Bill Slattery, senior, and we hurried up there. What do you think of that? Stung to death by wasps!"

"Hastings was a fool for going up there," said Chaviski. "It is cedar country, and there are wasp nests everywhere. Wasp nests in cedar trees all along Cedar Creek. In the old days when I used to fish Cedar it used to average one wasp nest for every two or three trees. Sometimes there would be more than one nest in a tree. Maybe Hastings ran into a nest or something, or hit one with his rod."

"Maybe so," said West, "but the case needs investigating, and that's the reason I wanted you to look

into it for me. Doc Farmington's a fine M.D., of course. And if he says he died of wasp stings, he died of wasp stings.

"But Doc's no detective, and here a mighty good man is found dead. I told Doc I was going to get you and he was all for it. When the cashier of a bank dies like that I figure a second look is called for."

"Okay," said Chaviski, "what kind of a guy is young Slattery?"

"Spoiled kid. Out of college a couple of years and feeling his oats. Dad made him vice-president after a year's experience in the bank. Of course, when his old man passes away young Bill will be the next president of the Caney County National Bank."

"What's his habits?"

"Runs around. Down at Hot Springs the entire racing season. Heck of a place for a banker to be. Not married but he likes the girls, likes having a grand time."

"Look here, West," Chaviski said, "you wouldn't be using me as a cat's paw in this damned thing—to pull out your hot chestnuts, would you?"

West laughed. "I'm not accusing the kid, Chaviski. The Slatterys and their bank were my supporters and are friends of mine. This is Slattery's cashier. He died up there with young Slattery on a fishing trip. I figure there might be talk like 'That young sheriff wouldn't know a clue if it walked up and hit him in the face.' Understand?"

Joe Chaviski grinned. "I'm beginning to. My brain isn't noted for its speed. Seems like young Slattery is reacting to his position in a perfectly natural way for one his age. What kind of a kid is he personally? Spoiled, you say. Is he a horse's rear? Vicious? Pain in the neck?"

"Nothing like that. Just spoiled and a little wild. Everybody expects him to grow out of it, settle down in a year or two, get married to a nice Caney County girl and buckle right down into bank routine."

"Fish a lot?"

"Not particularly. His father built that cabin on Cedar Creek several years ago, mainly to get the boy interested in the outdoors. His dad is quite a fisherman and started taking Billy out when he was a kid. But young Bill never went in for it too much. After the cabin was built he used it mainly for entertaining his friends. I've been up there more than once as a guest. Or if you wanted to take a party up there, all you had to do was ask one of them for the key."

IT WAS two forty-five. Dr. Farmington, both of the Slatterys, and members of the coroner's jury were at the mortuary when Joe Chaviski and Sheriff West arrived. Chaviski shook hands with the graying president of the Caney County National Bank, and then he met his son. Young Slattery, still in his khaki fishing clothes, appeared to be suffering from shock. He was tall, rather slender, a youngster with warm brown eyes and wavy brown hair.

Chaviski rather liked the boy at first look, and he remembered what the sheriff West told him about the boy being popular with the girls. No wonder! This kid could be a real lady-killer!

The group viewed the body. Dr. Farmington pointed to a dozen or more welts on the back of Hasting's neck, on his face, his arms and wrists, and even along his shoulders, where the angry wasps had stuck their barbs in through the light shirt he had been wearing.

Young Slattery told his story, in a voice choked with emotion: "We started fishing about seven-thirty this morning. Hastings had never gone fishing with me before, but dad said he was a good fisherman years ago, and he seemed to get over the rocks very well for a man his age.

"So I thought it was all right for him to fish upstream, while I fished down. It's a small stream, you know, with room for just one man to fish in a hole at a time. That's the way dad and I always fished it.

"I gave Mr. Hastings my extra key to the cabin, and we agreed to be back there at noon and have a bite of lunch. Or if the fish weren't biting, we could come in before noon, either one of us, and wait for the other fellow. I fished on downstream to what dad and I called Blue Hole Number Two, about half a mile down stream, fishing all the way. By eleven o'clock I hadn't caught anything worth keeping—two or three small bass and a half dozen perch.

"I turned them all back and returned to the cabin. The door was standing wide open, with the key in the lock, and Mr. Hastings was lying in the middle of the floor. There was no question about it; he was dead. We don't have a phone in the cabin, so I drove to the nearest farm house and called Dr. Farmington."

"Any questions?" Dr. Farmington asked.

"I have one," said Chaviski. "You say Mr. Hastings hadn't gone fishing in several years until this morning?"

"I can answer that," said Dr. Farmington. "Sam had been jumpy lately. As his doctor I could see that his nerves were frayed. He had been sad and lonely since his wife died. I understood he was planning to retire and move out to where his children lived. I told Sam he'd better start taking it a little easier than

he had been doing. When he failed to do this I suggested to Mr. Slattery that he ought to get Sam interested in fishing again. He used to be a good fisherman. I went out with him a time or two myself back before both of us became so damn busy. This tension of business is killing many a good man today."

"I was going with Sam myself," said the senior Slattery, "only something came up and I got my son to go instead."

"Did you go up to the cabin when Bill phoned you?" Joe Chaviski asked Dr. Farmington.

"Yes," said the doctor. "I had my secretary call Sheriff West and Mr. Slattery, and I jumped in my car and got up to the cabin as fast as I could. Sheriff West and Slattery were a couple of minutes behind me. I had my emergency kit with me, but it was no use. Sam had been dead at least two hours, in my opinion, when I got there."

"He must have walked right into a wasp nest," said Chaviski.

"Yes," said the coroner. "I figure probably down on the creek somewhere. He didn't have his fly rod with him."

"Were both of you using fly rods, Bill?" Chaviski asked.

"No sir, I was using a spinning rod. Sam was using a fly rod."

"Sam used a fly rod when I fished with him, said Dr. Farmington. "These spinning rods came along after Sam quit fishing."

Chaviski nodded. "That figures," he said. "You know, I'd like to go up to the cabin and take a look around."

"Good idea," said Dr. Farmington. "I'd like to have the jury look the place over myself."

Twenty minutes later they were at the cabin, a vine-covered structure of rough-hewn logs, with a large fireplace of natural stone, and nestled within a few yards of the high water mark of the clear mountain stream, which was Cedar Creek.

While young Slattery and Dr. Farmington were describing the position of Hastings' body as it had lain on the floor, Joe Chaviski studied the interior of the building. Dr. Farmington picked up a fly rod, line still attached and popping bug hooked carefully in the ring near the reel, and placed it on the floor.

"It was on the floor," Farmington said, "partly under Hastings' body, in this position. That about right, Bill?"

Young Slattery nodded.

While the jury was deliberating, Joe Chaviski went over and stood before the fireplace. Old Man Slattery surely had done everything in his power to make a lover of the outdoors out of his son. There were several beautiful fly rods and spinning rods inside the glass case on one side of the fireplace, and a gun-rack on the other side.

Chaviski had always wanted a cabin like this himself, where a man could sit on a winter night

and enjoy a roaring fire. But there hadn't been a fire in this fireplace in months, except for some newspapers which had been burned there. Stacks of well seasoned hickory and cedar slabs were on each side of the hearth.

"Death from the stings of wasps" was the verdict of the jury, reached within a few minutes.

"Glad you could come with the sheriff, Mr. Chaviski," said Slattery, senior. His son merely shook hands and remained silent.

Dr. Farmington also thanked Chaviski. "Glad Sheriff West brought you along," he said. "This was one of the most unusual, most unfortunate accidents I've ever heard of."

"I wonder," said Joe Chaviski, "if I could borrow the key to the cabin from one of you. I'd like to come up here tomorrow and look around."

The elder Slattery appeared surprised. "Look around? You think there may have been something here other than an accident?"

"One or two things I haven't got clear in my mind," said Chaviski. "We don't know where the accident happened. I noticed two or three wasps outside the cabin. One wasp could have stung him as he came into the cabin, but he had been stung a dozen times or more. Now where did that happen? He couldn't have gone far, as allergic as he was to stings.

"Another thing," Chaviski looked first at young Slattery and then at Dr. Farmington, "the fly rod was on the floor you say, partly under the body. Did either of you hook the popping bug in the ring by the reel, or was it that way when you found it?"

"It was that way," said young Slattery. "I didn't touch it."

"That's right," said Dr. Farmington. "That's the way it was when I reached the cabin, before the body was moved."

"I never heard of a man being stung by wasps taking that time with his rod," said Chaviski. "I'm not satisfied, gentlemen. I want to come back up here in the morning, look around, see if I can backtrack anything. I'd try it this afternoon before it gets dark, only I have an appointment."

"If you want to investigate further you are welcome," Slattery said. "Son let him have your key."

The young man gave Joe Chaviski his key. "I think you're wrong," he said. "He may have had his line that way while he was walking by the side of the stream and run into a wasp nest. But I feel just like dad. Investigate fully, we'll both be grateful."

Dr. Farmington grinned. "Now you see why Sheriff West wanted Chaviski to look into this. Once a detective, always a detective."

Chaviski grinned. "I'm bringing my rod along too in the morning. I haven't fished this stream in years. I'll leave the key at the bank

or with Sheriff West tomorrow afternoon."

"SMELL OUT something, Joe?" Sheriff Clark West asked when they were driving back to town.

"Can you double back someway so nobody will notice you're doing so, and leave me at the cabin alone?"

"Sure can."

They took a side road a mile down the route, crossed a bridge, took another road back, and within fifteen minutes were at the cabin again.

"Now, Sheriff," said Chaviski, "don't say anything about this to a single soul when you get back to town. You slip back here alone just after dark, hide your car so it can't be seen, and then join me inside the cabin!"

The sheriff grinned. "Sounds like a snipe hunt."

"It could be a first class snipe hunt," said Chaviski, "with me holding the bag. But I like company when I'm on a job like this."

As the sheriff drove away, Joe Chaviski was standing in front of the cabin looking up at the gable above the door. Three or four wasps were stirring around up there. One darted down at him then turned back.

He examined the door knob, stooped down and picked up a couple of leaves from the ivy which were on the steps. The leaves, though they had been walked on, were as green as those that grew against the cabin logs.

He then went inside the cabin, locking the door and pocketing the key. It was dark inside, so he turned on the lights. Then he moved to the fireplace, went down on his hands and knees, and carefully began working among the ashes of the newspaper that had been burned there. With a smile of satisfaction he pulled out several small bits of gray paper. He placed these pieces in a cup which he got from the kitchen cabinet, and kept on fishing among the burnt paper and ashes.

In time, satisfied, Chaviski returned the cup to the kitchen, and then opened the door of the glass case where the fishing rods were kept. He removed a spinning rod and examined it, then looked quickly over the lines attached to the other rods in the case. Satisfied, he stood the spinning rod in the corner, turned out the light, and stretched back in a chair in front of the fireplace.

As he sat there he dreamed about owning such a cabin, of being able to live there if he wished, of coming up in the winter time and spending a whole week, burning hickory logs in the fireplace, and popping corn over the coals—of going out of a morning and shooting squirrels before breakfast, of knocking off a young buck in season.

He lay back in the chair and

heard the forest go to sleep and then the awakening of the wilderness night life. He heard the water of Cedar Creek rippling along behind the cabin, and he wondered why life had had to move so fast in the last two decades following World War II.

He heard a rapping on the door. He hadn't realized that he had dropped off to sleep. It was Sheriff West.

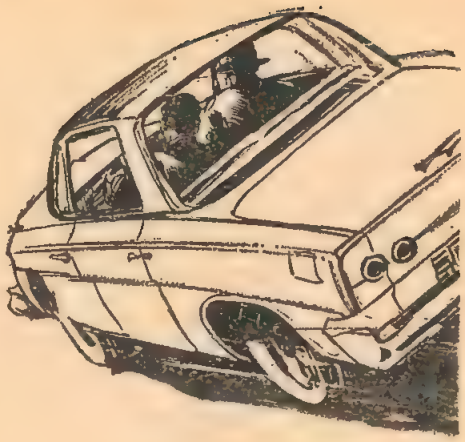
"All ready for that snipe hunt," said the sheriff.

"Okay," said Chaviski. "But if we are going to bag that snipe we'd better wait in the bedroom. I don't think it will be too long in arriving."

The night grew dark, and then the moon popped out above Cedar Mountain, and the outdoors was a mixture of silver light and black lacy shadows. A slight wind was stirring the oaks and the pines about the cabin, and leafy patterns danced upon the graveled driveway.

They heard the car coming before they saw it—a dark mass slipping down from the highway and heading towards the cabin. There was a grinding of tires, the sound of a car door, and then the grating of a key in the lock on the cabin door.

The door opened, and a thin beam from a flashlight spotted about the floor and then focused on the fireplace. A shadow was bending down and searching through



the ashes of the fireplace—and muttering and talking. The great two hundred fifty-five-pound body of Chaviski swept up the shadow in his two massive arms, and there was a hoarse scream of terror. Sheriff Clark West snapped on the light.

The man Joe Chaviski was holding in a grip of iron was Dr. Farmington.

"He's got a gun. Get it out of his inside pocket," said Chaviski.

The sheriff secured the gun, then snapped handcuffs on the doctor.

"All right, what's the meaning of this?" said Dr. Farmington.

"The meaning," said Chaviski, "is that you should have been a little more careful in burning that wasp nest."

"What are you talking about?" asked the doctor.

"You wanted to shut poor old Sam Hastings up but good," said Chaviski, "so you figured you'd do

it with wasps instead of a gun."

"You must be crazy, Chaviski. And you too, West. I've had a key to this cabin since it was built. The Slatterys gave it to me. Used it lots of times. Why I was up here just two weeks ago. I thought I had misplaced something when I was up here this afternoon—"

"So you came back to look for it in a very logical place—in the ashes of the fireplace," said Chaviski.

"You're nuts," said Dr. Farmington. "Hastings died of wasp stings. What do you think I did, catch a wasp in my bare hands and put it on him?"

"In a matter of speaking, yes," said Chaviski. "You were the doctor who treated him for wasp stings once before."

"And saved his life," said Farmington. "He would have died long before we got him to the hospital—"

"As a physician you were terribly concerned about Hastings' health recently. You suggested to the Slatterys he ought to come up to the cabin and go fishing. It was the only time he had gone fishing in years."

"I thought it would help him. Old Sam was getting jumpy here lately."

"You knew the two were coming up here fishing today. You knew they would fish in opposite directions along the stream, since it was so small. And you knew there was a big, fat wasp nest in the gable above the door of the cabin."

"Did you see a wasp nest there, Sheriff West?" asked Farmington.

"No, Doc, I sure didn't," said the sheriff.

"But you did see several wasps up there flying around, sheriff?" said Chaviski.

"Yes. That's right, I did."

"And if you had looked closely enough you would have seen the little gummy tip by which the wasp nest had been attached beneath the comb of the gable. And two or three of the wasps were clinging to this."

"How does all this nonsense involve me?" asked the doctor.

"While young Slattery and Hastings were fishing, you came to the cabin, went inside, got a spinning rod from the rod case—selecting one with strong ten-pound monofilament line. You used the snap swivel at the end of the line as a loop and ran the line through, making a slip-knot. Then you made a sizeable loop at the end of the six and a half foot rod, got a chair, placed the chair outside the door, stood on it, reached up with the rod, slipped the noose around the wasp nest, and probably got a sting or two yourself while doing it. Next you cut off the line, leaving enough to tie to the doorknob.

"You hurried inside and replaced the spinning rod in the rod case, but you did not replace the snap swivel, while all the other spinning rods in the case had snap

swivels. Then you came out of the cabin, closed the door, tied the end of the monofilament line up short to the doorknob, concealing the line under the leaves of the ivy."

Dr. Farmington smiled sarcastically. "What next, Sherlock?"

"With your trap set, you hurried downstream, spotted Hastings, told him that someone, probably Mr. Slattery, wanted to see him at the cabin, that something had come up. At any rate you got him to return to the cabin. He hurried on ahead, while you tarried behind. When Hastings opened the door, the wasp nest was pulled down on his head. He was stung severely, dying almost instantly from the multiple shock of the many stings, just as you knew he would.

"You remained at a safe distance from the cabin, waited until the wasps quieted down and had deserted the fallen nest. Then you slipped to the door, clipped off the monofilament line from the door knob, went inside the cabin, stepping around the body of Sam Hastings. You burned the wasp nest and the piece of monofilament in the fireplace."

"Smart, smart!" said Dr. Farmington. "What jury will believe such a fantastic theory and no proof at all?"

"You forget," said Chaviski, "the reason you slipped back to the cabin tonight was to make sure you had left no traces. But you were hours too late. My nose told me this afternoon that the paper fire in the

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fireplace was very fresh. I didn't think young Slattery or Sam Hastings had any occasion to burn a newspaper, and I thought I could see bits of wasp nest in the fireplace. You know the fresh part of a live wasp nest is pretty much wet paper pulp, and wet paper doesn't burn very easily.

"And you didn't know, but a piece of monofilament line, while it burns readily, has a tendency to break off and seal into bits when a flame touches it. I wasn't sure in my mind this afternoon who the killer was, so I spread around the word that I was coming back here tomorrow to look around. I figured that would bring the guilty person up here tonight trying to cover up anything he might possibly have left undone.

"I have several pieces of the wasp nest that you were hunting for, together with a bit or two of the ten-pound monofilament line, and the snap swivel—and the loop, with a trace of the nest still attached, in a cup on the kitchen cabinet in there. Dr. Farmington, you shouldn't have panicked. I'm sure you had plenty of time to dispose of the evidence properly before young Slattery returned to the cabin."

Dr. Farmington turned bitterly to Sheriff West. "And I voted for you!" he said.

"But Doc, what could you possibly have against poor old Sam Hastings?" said the sheriff. "He never hurt anybody in his life."

Dr. Farmington suddenly began shaking. He appeared to age ten years, and he slumped into a chair.

"All my dreams, all my efforts to build a better community are gone—gone up in smoke," he said. "And it was Sam Hastings who caused it! I was going to have that hospital clinic going within the next eighteen months, and it would have meant plenty to the people of Caney County. All the old people on Medicare could have gone there instead of over to Fort Sanders. The doctors in Fort Sanders don't want them. You know that, don't you?"

Dr. Farmington paused, and then went on with an effort. "Sam Hastings was my silent partner. He had more money than I had. He was putting more money into the hospital clinic than I was. He owned the majority stock in the new drugstore. Everything was going swell, until Sam suddenly started getting jumpy. He wanted to sell out and go live with his children. I didn't have the money to pick up his stock, and if he sold to somebody else the going would have been rough. Whoever he sold to would have the controlling interest. I figured that if Sam was out of the way, I might raise enough money to buy up his stock from his children at a big saving.

"That's why I did it, gentlemen. I had the community's interest at heart," Dr. Farmington whined.

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Please print **July—67**

The Dead Man

by Fritz Leiber Jr.

Who—or what—was the grisly Thing that came from the grave to wreck its fearsome will?

PROFESSOR MAX REDFORD opened the frosted glass door of the reception room and beckoned to me. I followed him eagerly. When the most newsworthy doctor at one of America's foremost medical schools phones a popular-science writer and asks him to drop over, but won't tell him why, there is cause for excitement. Especially when that doctor's researches, though always well-founded, have tended towards the sensational.

I remembered the rabbits so allergic to light that an open shade raised blisters on their shaved skins, the hypnotized heart patient whose blood-pressure slowly changed, the mold that fed on blood clots in a living animal's brain. Fully half my best articles with a medical slant came from Max. We had been rather close friends for several years.

As we hurried along the hushed corridor, he suddenly asked me, "What is death?"

That wasn't the sort of question I was expecting. I gave him a quick

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No collection of the occult or the weird in fiction could be complete without the name of Fritz Leiber, Jr. Son of the world famous Shakespearean actor of the same name, Mr. Leiber became famous very early in his career for his superlative stories. His honors are too numerous to mention. He has won two Hugos—in 1958 for "The Big Time," voted best science fiction novel of the year, and in 1965 for "The Wanderer." "He has had over fifty stories in more than sixty anthologies—at one time an entire issue of the magazine FANTASTIC was devoted to his works. It is a privilege to include "The Dead Man" in our Department of Lost Stories. From time to time in this magazine you will see this department. When you do, read with care and appreciation. You will be reading a story which, whatever its field, whatever its length has been remembered and revered as too good to be forgotten. Fritz Leiber, Jr.—and this widely acclaimed story of his —belong in this select group. Read it. You'll remember it for a long time.

THE EDITORS

look. His bullet-shaped head, with its shock of close-cropped grizzled hair, was hunched forward. The eyes behind the thick lenses were bright, almost mischievous. He was smiling.

I shrugged.

"I have something to show you," he said.

"What, Max?"

"You'll see."

"A story?"

He shook his head. "At present I don't want a word released to the public or the profession."

"But some day—?" I suggested.

"Maybe one of the biggest."

We entered his office. On the examination table lay a man, the lower half of his body covered by a white sheet. He seemed to be asleep.

Right there I got a shock. For although I hadn't the faintest idea who the man was, I did recognize him. I was certain that I had seen that handsome face once before—through the French windows of the living room of Max's home, some weeks ago. It had been pressed

passionately to the face of Velda, Max's attractive young wife, and those arms had been cradling her back. Max and I had just arrived at his lonely suburban place after a long evening session at the laboratory, and he had been locking the car when I glanced through the window.

When we had got inside, the man had gone, and Max had greeted Velda with his usual tenderness. I had been bothered by the incident, but of course there had been nothing I could do about it.

I turned from the examination table, trying to hide my surprise. Max sat down at his desk and began to rap on it with a pencil. Nervous excitement, I supposed.

From the man on the examination table, now behind me, came a dry, hacking cough.

"Take a look at him," said Max, "and tell me what disease he's suffering from."

"I'm no doctor," I protested.

"I know that, but there are some symptoms that should have an obvious meaning even to a layman."

"But I didn't even notice he was ill," I said.

Max goggled his eyes at me, "You didn't?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I turned—and wondered how in the world I could have missed it at the first glance. I supposed I had been so flustered at recognizing the man that I hadn't noticed anything about him. I had been seeing the memory image more than the actual person. For Max was right.

Anyone could have hazarded a diagnosis of this case. The general pallor, the hectic spots of color over the cheek bones, the emaciated wrists, the prominent ribs, the deep depressions around the collar bones, and above all the continued racking cough that even as I watched brought a bit of blood-specked mucous to the lips—all pointed at an advanced stage of chronic tuberculosis. I told Max so.

Max stared at me thoughtfully, rapping again on the table. I wondered if he sensed what I was trying to hide from him. Certainly I felt very uncomfortable. The presence of that man, presumably Velda's lover, in Max's office, unconscious and suffering from a deadly disease, and Max so sardonic-seeming and full of suppressed excitement, and then that queer question he had asked me about death—taken all together, they made a peculiarly nasty picture.

What Max said next didn't help either. "You're quite sure it's tuberculosis?"

"Naturally I could be wrong," I admitted uneasily. "It might be some other disease with the same symptoms or—" I had been about to say, "—or the effects of some poison," but I checked myself. "But the symptoms are there, unmistakably," I finished.

"You're positive?" He seemed to enjoy drawing it out.

"Of course!"

He smiled. "Take another look."

"I don't need to," I protested. For the first time in our relationship I was wondering if there wasn't something extremely unpleasant about Max.

"Take one, just the same."

Unwillingly I turned—and for several moments there was room in my mind for nothing but astonishment.

"What kind of trick is this?" I finally asked Max, shakily.

For the man on the examination table had changed. Unmistakably the same man, though for a moment I questioned even that, for now instead of the cadaverous spectre of tuberculosis, a totally different picture presented itself. The wrists, so thin a minute ago, were now swollen, the chest had become so unhealthily puffy that the ribs and collar bones were lost to view, the skin had a bluish tinge, and from between the sagging lips came a labored, wheezy breathing.

I still had a sense of horror, but now it was overlaid with an emotion that can be even stronger, an emotion that can outweigh all considerations of human personality and morals: the excitement of scientific discovery.

Whoever this man was, whatever Max's motives might be, whatever unsuspected strain of evil there might exist deep in his nature, he had *hit* on something here, something revolutionary. I didn't know what it was, but my heart pounded and little chills of excitement chased over my skin.

Max refused to answer any of the questions I bombarded him with. All he would do was sit back and smile at me and say, "And now, after your second look, what do you think's wrong with him?"

He finally badgered me into making a statement.

"Well of course there's something strange about it, but if you insist, here's my idea: Heart disease, perhaps caused by kidney trouble. In any case, something badly out of order with his heart."

Max's smile was infuriatingly bland. Again he rapped with his pencil, like some supercilious teacher.

"You're sure of that?" he prodded.

"Just as sure as I was the first time that it was tuberculosis."

"Well, take another look—and meet John Fearing."

I turned, and almost before I realized it, my hand had been firmly clasped and was being vigorously shaken by that of one of the finest physical specimens I have ever seen.

I remember thinking dazedly, "Yes, he's as incredibly handsome and beautifully built as he seemed to me when I glimpsed him kissing Velda. And along with it a strange sort of smoothness, like you felt in a Rudolf Valentino. No wonder a

woman might find him irresistible."

"I could have introduced you to John long ago," Max was saying. "He lives right near us, with his mother, and often drops over. But, well . . ." he chuckled, ". . . I've been a little jealous about John. I haven't introduced him to anyone connected with the profession. I've wanted to keep him to myself until we got a little further along with our experiments.

"And, John," Max went on, "this is Fred Alexander, the writer. He's one science popularizer who never strays a hairsbreadth into sensationalism and who takes infinite pains to make his reporting accurate. We can trust him not to breathe a word about our experiments until we tell him to.

"I've been thinking for sometime now that we ought to let a third person in on our work, and I didn't want it to be a scientist or yet an ordinary layman. Fred here struck me as having just the right sort of general knowledge and sympathetic approach. So I rang him up—and I believe we've succeeded in giving him quite a surprise."

"You certainly have," I agreed fervently.

John Fearing dropped my hand and stepped back. I was still running my eyes over his marvelously proportioned, athletic body. I couldn't spot a trace of the symptoms of the two dreadful diseases that had seemed to be wracking it minutes ago, or of any other sort of ill health.

As he stood there so coolly, with the sheet loosely caught around his waist and falling in easy folds, it seemed to me that he might well be the model for one of the great classical Greek statues. His eyes had something of the same tranquil, ox-like, "all-body" look.

Turning towards Max, I was conscious of a minor shock. I had never thought of Max as ugly. If I'd ever thought of him at all in regard to looks, it had been as a man rather youthful for his middle age, stalwart, and with pleasingly rugged features.

Now, compared to Fearing, Max seemed a humped and dark-browned dwarf.

But this feeling of mine was immediately swallowed up in my excited curiosity.

Fearing looked at Max. "What diseases did I do this time?" he asked casually.

"Tuberculosis and nephritis," Max told him.

They both acted pleased. In fact, mutual trust and affection showed so plainly in their manner toward each other that I was inclined to dismiss my suspicions of some sinister underlying hatred.

After all, I told myself, the embrace I had witnessed might have been merely momentary physical intoxication on the part of the two young and lovely people, if it had been even that much. Certainly

what Max had said about his desire to keep Fearing a secret from his friends and colleagues might very well explain why Fearing had disappeared that night.

One the other hand, if a deeper and less fleeting feeling did exist between Max's pretty wife and protege, Max might very well be aware of it and inclined to condone it. I knew him to be a remarkably tolerant man in some respects. In any case, I had probably exaggerated the importance of the matter.

And I certainly didn't want any such speculations distracting my thoughts now, when I was bending all my mental efforts to comprehend the amazing experiment that had just been conducted before my eyes.

Suddenly I got a glimmer of part of it.

"Hypnotism?" I asked Max.

He nodded, beaming.

"And the pencil-rappings were cues? I mean, signals for him to carry out instructions given to him in an earlier stage of the trance?"

"That's right."

"I seem to recall now," I said, "that the raps were different in each case. I suppose each combination of raps were hooked up with a special set of instructions you'd give him."

"Exactly," said Max. "John won't respond until he gets the right signal. It seems a rather complicated way of going about it, but it isn't really. You know how a sergeant will give his men a set of orders and then bark out 'March!'? Well, the raps are John's marching signals. It works out better than giving him the instructions at the same time he's supposed to be carrying them out. Besides, it's a lot more dramatic."

"I'll say it is!" I assured him. "Max, let's get to the important point. How in the world did John fake those symptoms?"

Max raised his hands. "I'll explain everything. I didn't call you in just to mystify you. Sit down."

I hurriedly complied. Fearing effortlessly lifted himself onto the edge of the examination table and sat there placidly attentive, forearms loosely dropped along his thighs.

"As you know," Max began, "It's a well-established fact that the human mind can create all sorts of tangible symptoms of disease, without the disease itself being present in any way. Statistics show that about half the people who consult doctors are suffering from such imaginary ailments."

"Yes," I protested, "but the symptoms are never so extreme, or created with such swiftness. Why, there was even blood in the mucous. And those swollen wrists—"

Again Max raised his hands. "The difference is only one of degree. Please hear me out."

"Now John here," he continued, "is a very well adjusted, healthy-minded person, but a few years ago

he was anything but that." He looked at Fearing, who nodded his agreement. "No, our John was a regular bad boy of the hospitals. Rather, his subconscious mind was, for of course there is no question of faking in these matters, the individual sincerely believes that he is sick.

"At all events, our John seemed to go through an unbelievable series of dangerous illnesses that frightened his mother to distraction and baffled his doctors, until it was realized that the illnesses were of emotional origin. That discovery wasn't made for a long time because of the very reason you mentioned—the unusual severity of the symptoms.

"However in the end it was the extraordinary power of John's subconscious to fake symptoms that gave the show away. It began to fake the symptoms of too many diseases, the onsets and recoveries were too fast, it jumped around too much. And then it made the mistake of faking the symptoms of germ diseases, when laboratory tests showed that the germs in question weren't present.

"The truth having been recognized, John was put in the hands of a competent psychiatrist, who eventually succeeded in straightening out the personality difficulties that had caused him to seek refuge in sickness. They turned out to be quite simple ones—an overprotective and emotionally demanding mother and a jealous and unaffectionate father, whose death a few years back had burdened John with guilt feelings.

"It was at that time—just after the brilliant success of the psychiatrist's treatment—that I ran across the case. It happened through Velda. She became friends with the Fearings, mother and son, when they moved into our neighborhood, and she visited with them a lot."

As Max said that, I couldn't resist shooting a quick glance at Fearing, but I couldn't see any signs of uneasiness or smugness. I felt rather abashed.

"One evening when John was over at our place, he mentioned his amazing history of imaginary illnesses, and pretty soon I wormed the whole story out of him. I was immediately struck with something about his case that the other doctors had missed. Or if they had noticed it, they hadn't seen the implications—or the possibilities.

"Here was a person whose body was fantastically obedient to the dictates of his subconscious mind. All people are to some degree psychosomatic, to give it its technical name—you know, *psyche* and *soma,* mind and body. But our John was psychosomatic to a vastly greater degree. One in a million. Perhaps unique.

"Very likely some rare hereditary strain was responsible for this. I don't believe John will be angry with me if I tell you that his mother used to be—she's really changed herself a great deal under the psy-

chiatrist's guidance—but that she used to be an excessively hysterical and emotionally tempestuous person, with all sorts of imaginary ailments herself, though not as extreme as John's, of course. And his father was almost exactly the same type."

"That's quite right, Dr. Redford," Fearing said earnestly.

Max nodded. "Apparently the combination of these two hereditary strains in John produced far more than a doubling of his parents' sensitivities.

"Just as the chameleon inherits a color-changing ability that other animals lack, so John has inherited a degree of psychosomatic control that is not apparent in other people—at least not without some kind of psychological training of which at present I have only a glimmering.

"All this was borne in on me as I absorbed John's story, hanging on every word. You know, I think both John and Velda were quite startled at the intensity of my interest." Max chuckled. "But they didn't realize that I was on to something. Here, right in my hands, was a person with, to put it popularly, only the most tenuous of boundaries between his mental and material atoms—for of course, as you know, both mind and matter are ultimately electrical in nature.

"Our John's subconscious mind had perfect control of his heartbeat and circulatory system. It could flood his tissues with fluids, producing instant swellings, or dehydrate them, giving the effect of emaciation. It could play on his internal organs and ductless glands as if they were musical instruments, creating any life-time it wanted. It could produce horrible discords, turn John into an idiot, say, or an invalid, as it tried to do, or perhaps an acromegalic monster, with gigantic hands and head, by stimulating bone-growth after maturity.

"Or his subconscious mind could keep all his organs in perfect tune, making him the magnificently healthy creature you see today."

I looked at John Fearing and realized that my earlier impression of the excellence of his physique had, if anything, fallen short of the mark. It wasn't just that he was a clear-eyed, unblemished, athletically-built young man. There was more to it than that—something intangible.

It occurred to me that if any man could be said to radiate health, in the literal meaning of that ridiculous cliche, it was John Fearing. I knew it was just my imagination, but I seemed to see a pulsating, faintly golden aura about him.

And his mind appeared to be in as perfect balance as his body. He was wonderfully poised as he sat there with just the sheet pulled around him. Not the faintest suggestion of nerves. Completely alive, yet in a sense completely impassive.

Suddenly it hit me, right between the eyes as they say, that Velda *must* love John, that no woman

could avoid becoming infatuated with such a man. Not just a football star or a muscle maniac, but a creature infinitely subtler.

And yet, in spite of all this, I was conscious of something a shade repellant about Fearing. Perhaps it was that he seemed too well-balanced, too smooth-running, like a gleaming dynamo say, or a beautiful painting without that little touch of ugliness or clashing contrast which creates individuality.

In most people, too, one senses the eternal conflict between the weak and indecisive tyrant Mind and the stubborn and rebellious slave Body, but in Fearing the conflict seemed completely absent, which struck me as unpleasant. There was a kind of deep-seated toughness about him, a suggestion of indestructibility.

One might have said, "He'd make a nasty ghost."

Of course all this may just have been envy on my part for Fearing's poise and physique, or some sort of jealousy I felt on Max's account.

But whatever the sources of my feeling of revulsion, I now began to believe that Max shared it. Not that Max had slackened in his genial, affectionate, almost fatherly manner toward John, but that he was so effortful about it. Those elephantine "our Johns," for example. I didn't get the feeling that he was concealing a jealous hatred, however, but that he was earnestly fighting an irrational inward aversion.

As for Fearing, he seemed completely unaware of any hostile feeling on Max's part. His manner was completely open and amiable.

For that matter, I wondered if Max himself were aware of his own feeling. All these thoughts didn't take much time. I was intent on Max's story.

Max Redford leaned across the desk. He was blinking excitedly, which, with his glasses, gave an odd effect of flashing eyes.

"My imagination was stirred," he said. "There was no end to the things that might be learned from such a super-psychosomatic individual. We could study disease symptoms under perfect conditions, by producing them in controlled amounts in a healthy individual. All sorts of physiological mysteries could be explored. We could trace out the exact patterns of all the nervous processes that are normally beyond the mind's reach. Then if we could learn to impart John's ability to other people—but that's getting a bit ahead of my story.

"I talked to John. He saw my point, realized the service he might render mankind, and gladly agreed to undergo some experiments.

"But at the first attempt a snag appeared. John could not produce any symptoms by a conscious effort, no matter how hard he tried. As I said before, you can't consciously fake a psychosomatic illness, and that was what I was asking John to do. And since he'd un-

dergone psychiatric treatment his subconscious mind was so well behaved that it wouldn't yield to any ordinary blandishments.

"At that point we almost gave up the project. But then I thought of a way we might be able to get around the snag: suggestions given directly to the subconscious mind through hypnotism. John proved a good hypnotic subject. We tried it —and it worked!"

Max's eyes looked bright as stars as he said that. "That's about how matters stand today," he finished off, sinking back in his chair. "We've started a little special work on arterial tension, the lymphatic glands and their nerve supply, one or two other things. But mainly we've been perfecting our setup, getting used to the hypnotic relationship. The important work still lies ahead."

I exhaled appreciatively. Then an unpleasant thought struck me. I wasn't going to voice it, but Max asked, "What is it, Fred?" and I couldn't think of anything else to say, and after all it was a thought that would have occurred to anyone.

"Well, with all this creation of extreme symptoms," I began, "isn't there a certain amount of—"

Max supplied the word. "Danger?" He shook his head. "We are always very careful."

"And in any case," Fearing's bell-like voice broke in, "the possibilities being what they are, I would consider almost any risks worth running." He smiled cheerfully.

The double meaning I momentarily fancied in his words nettled me. I went on impulsively, "But surely some people would be apt to consider it extremely dangerous. Your mother, for instance, or Velda."

Max looked at me sharply.

"Neither my mother nor Mrs. Redford know anything of the extent of our experiments," Fearing assured me.

There was a pause. Unexpectedly, Max grinned at me, stretched, and said to Fearing, "How do you feel now?"

"Perfectly fit."

"Feel up to another little demonstration?"

"Certainly."

"That reminds me, Max," I said abruptly, "out in the corridor you mentioned something about—"

He shot me a warning glance.

"We'll go into that some other time," he said.

"What diseases are you going to have me do this time?" Fearing queried.

Max wagged his finger. "You know you're never told that. Can't have your conscious mind messing things up. We'll have some new signals, though. And, Fred, I hope you won't mind waiting outside while I put John under and give him his instructions—acquaint him with the new signals. I'm afraid we still haven't gotten far along enough

to risk the possibly disturbing presence of a third person during the early stages of an experiment. One or two more sessions and it should be all right, though.

"Understand, Fred, this is just the first of a large number of experiments I want you to witness. I'm asking a great deal of you, you see. The only tangible compensation I can offer you is exclusive rights to break the story to the public when we feel the time is ripe."

"Believe me, I consider it a great honor," I assured him sincerely as I went out.

In the corridor I lit a cigarette, puffed it a moment, and then the tremendous implications of Max's experiments really hit me.

Suppose, as Max had hinted, that it proved possible to impart Fearing's ability to other people?

The benefits would be incalculable. People would be able to help their bodies in the fight against disease and degenerative processes. For instance, they could cut down the flow of blood from a wound, or even stop it completely. They could marshal all the body's resources to fight local infections and stop disease germs before they ever got started.

Conceivably, they could heal sick organs, get them working in the right rhythm, unharden arteries, avert or stifle cancers.

It might be possible to prevent disease, even ageing, altogether.

We might look forward to a race of immortals, immune to time and decay.

A happy race, untroubled by those conflicts of body and mind, of instinct and conscience, that sap Mankind's best energies and are at the root of all discords and wars.

There was literally no limit to the possibilities.

I hardly felt I'd been in the corridor a minute, my mind was soaring so, when Max softly opened the door and beckoned to me.

Again Fearing lay stretched on the table. His eyes were closed, but he still looked every whit as vibrantly healthy as before. His chest rose and fell rhythmically with his breathing. I almost fancied I could see the blood coursing under the fair skin.

I was aware of a tremendous suppressed excitement in Max.

"We can talk, of course," he said. "Best keep it low, though."

"He's hypnotized?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And you've given him the instructions?"

"Yes. Watch."

"What are they this time, Max?"

Max's lips jerked oddly. "Just watch."

He rapped with the pencil.

I watched. For five, ten seconds nothing seemed to happen.

John Fearing's chest suddenly stopped moving.

His skin was growing pale.

There was a weak convulsive shudder. His eyelids fell open,

showing only the whites. Then there was no further movement whatever.

"Approach him," Max said, his voice thick. "Take his pulse."

Almost shaking with excitement, I complied. To my fumbling fingers, Fearing's wrist felt cold. I could not find a pulse.

"Fetch that mirror." Max's finger stabbed at a nearby shelf. "Hold it to his lips and nostrils."

The polished surface remained unclouded.

I backed away. Wonder gave place to fear. All my worst suspicions returned intensified. Once again I seemed to sense a strain of submerged evil in my friend.

"I told you I would show you something with a bearing on the question, 'What is death?' " Max was saying huskily. "Here you see death perfectly counterfeited—death-in-life. I would defy any doctor in the world to prove this man alive." There was a note of triumph in his voice.

My own was uneven with horror. "You instructed him to be dead?"

"Yes."

"And he didn't know it ahead of time?"

"Of course not."

For an interminable period—perhaps three or four seconds—I stared at the blanched form of Fearing. Then I turned to Max.

"I don't like this," I said. "Get him out of it."

There was something sneering about the smile he gave me.

"Watch!" He commanded fiercely, and rapped again.

It was only some change in the light, I told myself, that was giving Fearing's flesh a greenish tinge.

Then I saw the limp arms and legs stiffen and the face tighten into a sardonic mask.

"Touch him!"

Unwillingly, only to get the thing over with as swiftly as possible, I obeyed.

Fearing's arm felt stiff as a board and, if anything, colder than before.

Rigor Mortis.

But that faint odor of putrescence—I knew that could only be my imagination.

"For God's sake, Max," I pleaded, "you've got to get him out of it." Then, throwing aside reserve, "I don't know what you're trying to do, but you can't. Velda won't—"

Max jerked as I spoke the name. Instantly the terrifying shell that had gathered around him seemed to drop away.

It was as if that one word had roused him from a dream.

"Of course," he said, in his natural voice. He smiled reassuringly and rapped.

Eagerly I watched Fearing.

Max rapped again: Three—one.

It takes time, I told myself. Now the muscles were beginning to relax, weren't they?

But Max was rapping again. The signal printed itself indelibly on my brain: Three—one.

And yet again. Three—one. Three—one. Three—one.

I looked at Max. In his tortured expression I read a ghastly certainty.

I wouldn't ever want to relive the next few hours. I imagine that in all history there was never a trick conceived for reviving the dying that Max didn't employ, along with all the modern methods—injections, even into the heart itself, electrical stimulation, use of a new lightweight plastic version of the iron lung, surgical entry into the chest and direct massage of the heart.

Whatever suspicions I had had of Max vanished utterly during those hours. The frantic genuineness and inspired ingenuity of his efforts to revive Fearing couldn't possibly have been faked. No more could his tragic, rigidly suppressed grief have been stimulated. I saw Max's emotions stripped to the raw during those hours, and they were all good.

One of the first things he did was to call in several of the other faculty doctors. They helped him, though I could tell that from the first they looked upon the case as hopeless, and would have considered the whole business definitely irregular, if it hadn't been for their extreme loyalty to Max, far beyond any consideration of professional solidarity. Their attitude showed me, as nothing else ever had, Max's stature as a medical man.

Max was completely frank with them and everyone else. He made no effort whatsoever to suppress the slightest detail of the events leading up to the tragedy. He was bitter in his self-accusations, insisting that his judgment had been unforgivably at fault in the final experiment. He would have gone even further than that if it hadn't been for his colleagues. It was they who dissuaded him from resigning from the faculty and describing his experiments in such inaccurately harsh terms as to invite criminal prosecution.

And then there was Max's praiseworthy behavior toward Fearing's mother. While they were still working on Fearing, though without any real hope, she burst in. Whatever reforms the psychiatrist may have achieved in her personality, were washed out now.

I still can close my eyes and visualize that hateful, overdressed woman stamping around like an angry parrot, screaming the vilest accusations at Max at the top of her voice and talking about her son and herself in the most disgusting terms. But although he was near the breaking point, Max was never anything but compassionate toward her, accepting all the blame she heaped on his head.

A little later Velda joined Max. If I'd still had any of my early suspicions, her manner would have dissipated them. She was completely

practical and self-possessed, betraying no personal concern whatsoever in Fearing's death. If anything, she was too cool and unmoved. But that may have been what Max needed at the time.

The next days were understandably difficult. While most of the newspapers were admirably reserved and judicious in reporting the case, one of the tabloids played up Max as "The Doctor Who Ordered a Man to Die," featuring an exclusive interview with Fearing's mother.

The chorus of wild cries from various anti-science cults was of course to be expected. It led to a number of stories that crept into the fringe of print and would have been more unpleasant if they hadn't been so ridiculous.

One man, evidently drawing on Poe's story, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," demanded that a "death watch" be maintained on Fearing and, on the morning of the funeral, hinted darkly that they were interring a man who was somehow still alive.

Even the medical profession was by no means wholly behind Max Redford. A number of local doctors, unconnected with the medical school, were severe in their criticisms of him. Such sensational experiments reflected on the profession, were of doubtful value in any case, and so forth. Though none of these criticisms were released to the public.

The funeral was held on the third day. I attended it out of friendship for Max, who felt it his duty to be present. Fearing's mother was there, of course, dressed in a black outfit that somehow managed to look loud and common. Since the tabloid interview there had been a complete break between her and our group, so that her wailing tirades and nauseous sobbing endearments could only be directed at the empty air and the bronze-fitted casket.

Max looked old. Velda stood beside him, holding his arm. She was as impassive as on the day of Fearing's death.

There was only one odd thing about her behavior. She insisted that we remain at the cemetery until the casket had been placed in the tomb and the workman had fixed in place the marble slab that closed it. She watched the whole process with a dispassionate intentness.

I thought that perhaps she did it on Max's account, to impress on him that the whole affair was over and done with. Or she may conceivably have feared some unlikely final demonstration or foray on the part of the wilder anti-science groups and felt that the presence of a few intelligent witnesses was advisable to prevent some final garish news item from erupting into print.

And there may actually have been justification for such a fear. Despite the efforts of the cemetery

authorities, a number of the morbidly curious managed to view the interment and as I accompanied Max and Velda the few blocks to their home, there were altogether too many people roaming the quiet, rather ill-kempt streets of the scantily populated suburb.

Undoubtedly we were being followed and pointed at. When, with feelings of considerable relief, we finally got inside, there was a sharp, loud knock on the door we had just closed.

Someone had thrown a stone at the house.

For the next six months I saw nothing of Max. Actually this was as much due to my friendship for him as to the press of my work, which did keep me usually busy at the time. I felt that Max didn't want to be reminded in any way, even by the presence of a friend, of the tragic accident that had clouded his life.

I think, you see, that only I, and perhaps a few of Max's most imaginative colleagues, had any inkling of how hard Max had been hit by the experience and, especially, *why* it had hit him so hard. It wasn't so much that he had caused the death of a man through a perhaps injudicious experiment. That was the smaller part.

It was that, in so doing, he had wrecked a line of research that promised tremendous benefits to mankind. Fearing, you see, was irreplaceable. As Max had said, he was probably unique. And their work had been barely begun. Max had obtained almost no results of a measured scientific nature and he hadn't as yet any ideas whatever of the crucial thing: how to impart Fearing's ability to other people, if that were possible.

Max was a realist. To his clear, unsuperstitious mind, the death of one man was not nearly so important as the loss of possible benefits to millions. That he had played fast and loose with humanity's future —yes, he'd have put it that way— was, I knew, what hurt him most. It would be a long time before he regained his old enthusiasm.

One morning I ran across a news item stating that Fearing's mother had sold her house and gone for a European tour.

Of Velda I had no information.

Naturally I recalled the affair from time to time, turning it over in my mind. I reviewed the suspicions I'd had at the time, seeking some clue that might have escaped me, but always coming to the conclusion that the suspicions were more than wiped out by Max's tragic sincerity and Velda's composure after the event.

I tried to visualize the weird and miraculous transformations I had witnessed in Max's office. Somehow, try as I might, they began to seem more and more unreal. I had been excited that morning, I told myself, and my mind had exaggerated what I had seen. This unwill-

ingness to trust my own memory filled me at times with a strange poignant grief, perhaps similar to what Max must have felt at the breakdown of his research, as if some marvelous imaginative vision had faded from the world.

And occasionally I pictured Fearing as I'd seen him that morning, so radiantly healthy, his mind and body so unshakably knit. It was very hard to think of a man like that being dead.

Then, after six months, I received a brief message from Max. If I were free, would I visit him at his home that evening? Nothing more.

I felt a thrill of elation. Perhaps the period of thralldom to the past was over and the brilliant old mind was getting to work again. I had to break an engagement, but of course I went.

It had just stopped raining when I swung down from the interurban. Remnants of daylight showed a panorama of dripping trees, weed-bordered sidewalks, and gloom-invested houses.

Max had happened to build in one of those subdivisions that doesn't quite make the grade, while the unpredictable pulse of suburban life begins to beat more strongly farther out.

I passed the cemetery in which Fearing had been interred. The branches of unpruned trees brushed the wall, making sections of the sidewalk a leafy tunnel. I was glad I had a flashlight in my pocket for the walk back. It occurred to me that it was unfortunate Max had this unnecessary reminder almost on his doorstep.

I walked rapidly past houses that were more and more frequently separated by empty lots, and along a sidewalk that became progressively more cracked and weed-grown. There popped into my mind a conversation I had had with Max a couple of years ago. I had asked him if Velda didn't find it lonely out here, and he had laughingly assured me that both he and Velda had a passion for being alone and liked to be as far away as possible from spying neighbors.

I wondered if one of the houses I had passed had been that belonging to the Fearings.

Eventually I arrived at Max's place, a compact two-story dwelling. There were only a few more houses beyond it on the street. Beyond those, I knew, the weeds reigned supreme, the once hopeful sidewalks were completely silted and grown over, and the lamp-poles rusted lightlessly. Unsuccessful subdivisions are dismal spots.

In my nostrils, all the way had been the smell of wet cold earth and stone.

The living room lights were on, but I saw no one through the French window, where I had once glimpsed Velda and Fearing. The hall was dark. I rapped at the door. It opened instantly. I faced Velda.

I haven't described Velda. She was one of those very beautiful, dignified, almost forbidding, yet quite sexy girls that a successful, cultured man is apt to marry if he waits until he's middle-aged. Tall. Slim. Small head. Blonde hair drawn tightly across it. Blue eyes. Compact, distinguished features. Sloping shoulders, and then a body that a cynic would call the main attraction. And perhaps with partial inaccuracy, because an alert, well-informed, quite courageous mind went with it. Exquisite manners, but not much apparent warmth.

That was Velda as I remembered her.

The Velda I faced now was different. She was wearing a gray silk dressing gown. In the dim light from the street lamp behind me, the tight-drawn hair looked, not gray, but brittle. The tall beautiful body somehow seemed sterile, weedlike. She crouched like an old woman. The distinguished features in the face she lifted toward mine were pinched. The blue eyes, white circled, were much too staring.

She touched a finger to her thinned lips, and with the other hand timidly took hold of the lapel of my coat, as if to draw me away to some place where we could talk secretly.

Max stepped out of the darkness behind her an put his hands on her shoulders. She didn't stiffen. In fact, she hardly reacted except to softly drop her hand from my coat. She may have winked at me, as if to say, "Later, perhaps," but I can't be sure.

"You'd better be getting upstairs, dear," he said gently. "It's time you took a little rest."

At the foot of the stairs he switched on the light. We watched her as she went up, slowly, holding on to the rail.

When she was out of sight Max shook his head and said, rather lightly, "Too bad about Velda. I'm afraid that in a little while— However, I didn't ask you out here to talk about that."

I was shocked at his seeming callousness. A moment later, however, he said something which gave me a hint of the philosophy that underlay it.

"We're so mysteriously fragile, Fred. Some slight change in a gland's function, some faint shadow falling on a knot of nerve tissue, and—pouf. And there's nothing we can do about it, because we don't know, Fred, we simply don't know. If we could trace the thoughts in their courses, if we could set their healing magic radiating through the brain—but that's not to be for a while yet.

"Meanwhile, there's nothing we can do about it, except to face it cheerfully. Though it is hard when the person whose mind goes develops a murderous hatred of you at the same time. However, as I said, I don't want to talk about that, and

you'll please me if you don't either."

We were still standing at the bottom of the stairs. Abruptly he changed his manner, clapped me on the shoulder, steered me into the living room, insisted that I have a drink, and busied himself starting a fire in the open grate, all the while chatting loudly about recent doings at the medical school and pressing me for details of my latest articles.

Then, giving me no time whatever to think, he settled himself in the opposite chair, the fire blazing between us, and launched into a description of a new research project he was getting started on. It concerned the enzymes and the mechanisms of temperature-control of insects, and seemed to have far-reaching implications in fields as diverse as insecticide manufacture and the glandular physiology of human beings.

There were times when he got so caught up in his subject that it almost seemed to me it was the old Max before me, as if all the events of the past year had been a bad dream.

Once he broke off momentarily, to lay his hand on a bulky typescript on the table beside him.

"This is what I've been keeping myself busy with these last few months, Fred," he said quickly. "A complete account of my experiments with Fearing, along with the underlying theories, as well as I can present them, and all pertinent material from other fields. I can't touch the thing again, of course, but I hope someone else will, and I want him to have the benefit of my mistakes. I'm rather doubtful if any of the journals will accept it, but if they don't I'll publish it at my own expense."

It really gave me a pang to think of how much he must have suffered pounding out that typescript, meticulously, of course, knowing that it wasn't his job any more or ever could be, knowing that it was the account of a failure and a personal tragedy, knowing that it wouldn't be at all well received by his profession, but feeling duty-bound to pass on information that might some day kindle another mind and prove of scientific value to mankind.

And then the tragedy of Velda, which I hadn't yet been able to assimilate, properly with its faint, twist-of-the-screw suggestion that if Max had continued his research with Fearing he might conceivably have learned enough to be able to avert the cloud shadowing her mind.

Yes, I thought then, and I still think, that Max's behavior that night, especially his enthusiasm about his new research project, into which he'd obviously thrown himself wholeheartedly, was an inspiring and at the same time heart-rending example of the sort of unsentimental courage you find in the best scientists.

Yet at the same time I had the feeling that his new project wasn't the real reason for his summoning me. He had something very different on his mind, I felt, and as an unhappy person will, was talking himself out on other subjects as a preliminary to getting around to it. After a while he did.

The fire had died down somewhat. We had temporarily exhausted the topic of his new project. I was conscious of having smoked too many cigarettes. I asked Max some inconsequential question about a new advance in aviation medicine.

He frowned at the crawling flames, as if he were carefully weighing his answer. Then abruptly he said, without looking towards me, "Fred, there's something I want to tell you, something I felt I must tell you, but something I haven't been able to bring myself to tell you until now. I hated John Fearing, because I knew he was having a love affair with my wife."

I looked down at my hands. After a moment I heard Max's voice again. It wasn't loud, but it was rough with emotion.

"Oh come on, Fred, don't pretend you didn't know. You saw them through the window that night. You'll be surprised to know, Fred, how hard it was for me not to avoid you, or pick some quarrel with you, after that happened. Just the thought that you knew—"

"That's all I did see or know," I assured him. "Just that one glimpse." I turned and looked at him. His eyes were bright with tears.

"And yet you know, Fred," he went on, "that's the real reason I picked you to sit in on our experiments. I felt that knowing what you did, you would be better able than anyone else to check on my relationship with John."

There was one thing I had to say. "You are quite certain, Max, that your suspicions of Velda and Fearing were justified?"

One look at his face told me I needn't press that line of questioning any further. Max sat for a while with his head bowed. It was very quiet. The wind had died which earlier had splattered a few drops from nearby branches against the windowpanes.

Finally he said, "You know, Fred, it's very difficult to recapture lost emotions, either jealousy or scientific zeal. And yet those were the two main ones in this drama. For of course it wasn't until I had begun my experiments with Fearing that I found out about him and Velda."

He paused, then went on with difficulty. "I'm afraid I'm not a very broadminded man, Fred, when it comes to sex and possession. I think that if John had been some ordinary person, or if I had found out earlier, I would have behaved differently. Rather brutally, perhaps. I don't know. But the fact

that our experiments had begun, and that they promised so much, changed everything.

"You know, I really try to be a scientist, Fred," he went on, with the ghost, or cadaver rather, of a rueful smile. "And as a scientist, or just as a rational man, I had to admit that the possible benefits of our experiments infinitely outweighed any hurt to my vanity or manhood.

"It may sound grotesque, but as a scientist I even had to consider whether this love affair wasn't necessary to keep my subject cooperative and in a proper state of mind, and whether I shouldn't go out of my way to further it. As it was, I didn't have to vary my routine in order to give them plenty of opportunities, though I think that if that had been necessary, I might even have done it."

He clenched his fist. "You see, so very much depended on those experiments of ours. Though it's awfully hard for me to remember that now. The feeling's all gone . . . the tremendous vision . . . this typescript here is just dead stuff . . . an obligation.

"I feel differently about a lot of things now. About Velda and John, too. Velda wasn't exactly the girl I thought I was marrying. I've realized lately that she had a tremendous need to be adored, a kind of cold lust for beauty and ecstasy, like some pagan priestess. And I cooped her up here—the old story—and tried to feed her on my enthusiasms. Not exactly the right diet. And yet, you know, Fred, my life's work was inspired by Velda to an extent that you might find hard to believe. Even before I'd met Velda. The expectancy of her.

"And John? I don't think anyone will ever know the truth about John. I was only beginning to understand him, and there were sides to his nature I couldn't touch. A remarkable creature. In one sense, a true superman. In another, a mindless animal. Astonishing weaknesses, or blind spots. The influence of his mother. And then the way his instincts and conscience went hand in hand. I feel that John may have been completely sincere both about his desire for Velda and his desire to help me aid mankind. It may never have occurred to him that the two desires didn't exactly go together. It's quite possible he felt that he was being very nice to both of us.

"Yes, and if John and Velda's affair were something that could happen now, I think I would feel very differently about it.

"But then—? God, Fred, it's so hard to think truthfully about *them!* Then there existed in me, side by side, every moment of the day and night, the highest pinnacles of scientific excitement and the deepest pits of jealous rage. The one strictly subordinated!"

A note of passionate anger came into his voice. "For don't think I was weak, Fred. Don't think I ever

deviated so much as a hairsbreadth from the course that was scientifically and humamistically right. I kept my hatred for John in absolute check. And when I say that, I mean that. I'm no ignoramus, Fred. I know that when one tries to suppress feelings, they have a way of bursting out through unsuspected channels, due to the trickery of the subconscious mind.

"Well, I was on the watch for that. I provided every conceivable safeguard. I was fantastically cautious about each experiment. I know it may not have looked that way to you, but even that last one —heavens, we had often done experiments twice as dangerous, or as seemingly dangerous, testing every step of the way. Why, Soviet scientists have had people technically dead for over five minutes. With John it couldn't have been one!

"And yet. . . .

"That's what tormented me so, don't you see, Fred, when I couldn't revive him. The thought that my unconscious mind had somehow tricked me and opened a channel for my all-too-conscious hatred, found a chink in the wall that I'd neglected to stop up, a doorway unguarded for a second. As he lay there dead before my eyes, I was tortured by the conviction that there was some little thing that would revive him at once, if only I could remember what it was.

"Some little mistake or omission I'd made, which only had to be thought of to be corrected, but which my subconscious mind wouldn't let me remember. I felt that if only I could have relaxed my mind completely—but of course that was the one thing I couldn't do.

"I tried every way I knew to revive John, I reviewed every step I'd taken without finding a flaw, and yet that feeling of guilt persisted.

"Everything seemed to intensify it. Velda's frozen, suicidal calm, worse than the bitterest and most tempestuous accusations. The most childish things—even that silly occulist with his talk of a deathwatch on John.

"How John must hate me, I'd tell myself irrationally. Commanded to be dead, tricked into dying. not given the faintest hint of what was intended.

"And Velda. Never a reproachful word to me. Just freezing up. more and more, until her mind began to wither.

"And John. That miraculous body rotting in the tomb. Those magnificently knit muscles and nerves, falling apart cell by cell."

Max slumped in his chair exhausted. The last flame in the grate flickered out and the embers began to smoke. The silence was deadly.

And then I began to talk. Quietly. Nothing brilliant. I merely reviewed what I knew and what

Max had told me. Pointed out how, being the scientist he was, he couldn't have done anything but what he did. Reminded him of how he'd checked and double-checked his every action. Showed him that he hadn't the shred of a reason for feeling guilty any longer.

And finally my talk began to take effect, though, as Max said, "I don't think it's anything you've said. I've been all over that. It's that at last I've unburdened myself to someone. But I do feel better."

And I'm sure he did. For the first time I truly sensed the old Max in him. Battered and exhausted of course, and deeply seared by a new wisdom, but something of the old Max, nevertheless.

"You know," he said, sinking back in his chair, "I think I can really relax now for the first time in six months."

Immediately the silence settled down again. I remember thinking, queerly, that it was dreadful that a place could be so silent.

The fire had stopped smoking. Its odor had been replaced by that seeping in from the outside—the smell of cold wet earth and stone.

My taut muscles jerked spasmodically at the sudden grating of Max's chair against the floor. His face was ghastly. His lips formed words, but only choking sounds came out. Then he managed to get control of his voice.

"The cue! The cue for him to come alive again! I forgot I changed the signals. I thought it was still—"

He tore a pencil from his pocket and rapped on the arm of the chair: three—one.

"But it should have been—" And he rapped: three—two.

It is hard for me to describe the feeling that went through me as he rapped that second signal.

The intense quiet had something to do with it. I remember wishing that some other sound would break in—the patter of raindrops, the creaking of a beam, the hollow surge of the interurban.

Just five little raps, unevenly spaced, but embued with a quality, force, and rhythm that was Max's and nobody else's in the world—as individual as his fingerprint, as inimitable as his signature.

Just five little raps—you'd think they'd be lost in the walls, gone in a second. But they say that no sound, however faint, ever dies. It becomes weaker and weaker as it dissipates, the agitations of the molecules less and less, but still it goes on to the end of the world and back, to the end of eternity.

I pictured that sound struggling through the walls, bursting into the night air with an eager upward sweep, like a black insect, darting through the wet tangled leaves, soaring crazily into the moist tattered clouds, perhaps dipping inquisitively to circle one of the rusted lamppoles, before it streaked purposefully off along the dank

street, up, up, over the trees, over the wall, and then swooped down toward wet cold earth and stone.

And I thought of Fearing, not yet quite rotted in his tomb.

Max Redford and I looked at each other.

There came a piercing, blood-chilling scream from over our heads.

A moment of paralyzed silence. Then the wild clatter of footsteps down the stairs in the hall. As we sprang up together, the outside door slammed.

We didn't exchange a word. I stopped in the hall to snatch up my flashlight.

When we got outside we couldn't see Velda. But we didn't ask each other any questions as to which direction she'd taken.

We started to run. I caught sight of Velda almost a block ahead.

I'm not in too bad physical condition. I slowly drew ahead of Max as we ran. But I couldn't lessen the distance between myself and Velda. I could see her quite plainly as she passed through the pools of light cast by the street lamps. With the gray silk dressing gown flying out behind her, she sometimes looked like a skimming bat.

I kept repeating to myself, "But she couldn't have heard what we were saying. She couldn't have heard those raps."

Or could she?

I reached the cemetery. I shone my flashlight down the dark, leafy tunnel. There was no one in sight, but almost halfway down the block I noticed branches shaking where they dipped to the wall.

I ran to that point. The wall wasn't very high. I could lay my hand on its top. But I felt broken glass. I stripped off my coat, laid it over the top, and pulled myself up.

My flashlight showed a rag of gray silk snagged on a wicked barb of glass near my coat.

Max came up gasping. I helped him up the wall. We both dropped down inside. The grass was very wet. My flashlight wandered over wet, pale stones. I tried to remember where Fearing's tomb was. I couldn't.

We started to hunt. Max began to call, "Velda! Velda!"

I suddenly thought I remembered the lay-out of the place. I pushed on hurriedly. Max lagged behind, calling.

There was a muffled crash. It sounded some distance away. I couldn't tell the direction. I looked around uncertainly.

I saw that Max had turned back and was running. He vanished around a tomb.

I hurried after him as fast as I could, but I must have taken the wrong turning. I lost him.

I raced futilely up and down two aisles of tombstone and tomb. I kept flashing my light around, now near, now far. It showed pale stone, dark trees, wet grass, gravel path.

I heard a horrible, deep, gasping scream—Max's.

I ran wildly. I tripped over a headstone; sprawled on my face.

I heard another scream—Velda's. It went on and on.

I raced down another aisle.

I thought I would go on forever, and forever hearing that scream, which hardly seemed to pause for inhalation.

Then I came around a tangled clump of trees and I saw them.

My flashlight wavered back and forth across the scene.

They were there, all three of them.

I know that the police have a very reasonable explanation for what I saw, and I know that explanation must be right, if there is any truth in what we have been taught to believe about mind and body and death. Of course there are always those who will not quite believe, who will advance other theories. Like Max, with his experiments.

The only thing the police can't decide for certain is whether Velda managed to break into the tomb and open the casket unaided—they did find a rusty old screwdriver nearby—or whether tomb and casket hadn't been broken into at an earlier date by some pranksters.

They have managed to explain away almost completely, all evidence that tomb and casket were burst from the inside.

Velda can't tell them. Her mind is beyond reach.

The police have no doubts whatsoever about Velda's ability to strangle Max to death. After all, it took three strong men to get her out of the cemetery.

The odd position of Fearing's remains they attribute to some insane whim on Velda's part.

And of course, as I say, the police must be right. The only thing against their theory is the raps. And of course I can't make them understand just how tremendously significant those raps of Max, that diabolic three—two, seemed to me.

I can only tell what I saw, in the flashlight's wavering gleam.

The marble slab closing Fearing's tomb had fallen forward. The tomb was open.

Velda was backed against a tombstone opposite it. Her gray silk dressing gown was wet and torn to ribbons. Blood dribbled from a gash above her knee. Her blond hair streamed down tangledly. Her features were contorted.

She was staring down at the space between herself and Fearing's tomb. She was still screaming.

There before her, in the wet grass, Max Redford lay on his back. His head was twisted backward.

And across the lower part of Max's body, the half-fleshed fingers stretching toward his throat, the graveclothes clinging in tatters to the blackened, shrunken body, was all that was left of Fearing.

MESSENGER OF DISASTER

Strange, terrible was the tale she told—about the dead man who must return.

by

JOSEPHINE NOYES

THE SWIFT rain squall and the thundering had stopped and now clouds, mistily lovely pinnacles of white, winged across the brightening blue sky.

But in the ugly mountainous thunderheads now disappearing, fourteen-year-old Rosalind Melbourne had identified two monsters, hideous, marvelous. The huge creature with wicked cavernous eyes scudded across the sky,

sprouting hair shagging wildly about its fearsome head; the other, fantastically horrible, whirled arms of threatening scope and menacing grasp and leered uncontrollably, yet clearly he was the good monster.

Rosalind shivered with delight against the stacked pillows in the cottage hammock.

She had chanced upon this ancient almanac in the village library. Repeating its message to herself now, she felt an inner quivering appreciation: Thunderheads are messengers of disaster. They never sleep. Billowing, swelling ominously, they move over the entire world and when they become as dark as the insides of a black cat they switch off all earthly light and strike with danger-cloaked force. Disaster follows their appearance.

"Rosalind!"

Laura Melbourne came hurrying onto the porch delving distractedly into her enormous tote bag for the car keys. "Please, dear. If you would snap out of that daydream!"

Rosalind turned her head toward her mother.

"I must deliver this report personally. While the Still Lake Association is in committee. Rosalind, I want you to—"

Rosalind moaned, "Not again!"

"I mean, *Lynne*. When I'm in a hurry it's difficult to remember. I've called you Rosalind Ann since you were a baby." She looked concernedly at her only child and when she began talking again anxiety tinged her voice. "I wish—I keep wishing you weren't so imaginative."

Her daughter surveyed her with half-lidded eyes. "Lynne's for high school. And for becoming fifteen next month."

"I know. I know," Laura agreed impatiently. "Now, dear, I must depend on you to stay close to the phone. Western Union may call during the half-hour I'm away. The hospital will wire Paddington's time of arrival. He'll be released tomorrow and it's most important I meet him."

Rosalind raised her lengthy golden blond body clad in white topper and gray short shorts. "Why must he come here? Why here?"

Laura Melbourne advanced toward the hammock. When Rosalind caught her mother's stern expression she let her body plop down again.

"Dear, we've explained it carefully to you. If you weren't busy in the clouds, or tilting that pretty nose of yours in a book—"

Rosalind stuck out a beautifully-manicured big toe and prodded a bulge in the tote bag.

"Your keys!" she said.

Laura rescued the keys, smoothed her summery green dress, walked to the screendoor. There she paused, faced her daughter solemnly.

"I'll remind you, Paddington has had a nervous breakdown. Too

much studying and not enough sleep. He needs rest. Lots of rest. Paddington is a fine boy and we Melbournes are justly proud of him. He's made a remarkable record. Think of it—a PhD degree at the age of twenty-one!"

"Too much studying? I'll bear that bit in mind!"

"Can do without flippancy about this, Lynne. We owe a family responsibility. Your Aunt Lil, Paddington's mother, is in no condition to help an emotionally sick boy. He needs us." Laura frowned at the innumerable little bottles of nail polish within easy reach of the hammock crowding Rosalind's magazines—a triple stack of books, her hi fi set, and a wealth of records piled on the corner table.

Abruptly Rosalind shrieked, *"I'll have to give up my hammock?"*

"We can arrange for another at the other end of the porch. If Paddington finds a hammock relaxing. We'll try everything to help him get well. A tremendous career awaits him. For the present he may like fishing or being rowed on the lake.

"Movies?"

"No, Lynne. And no TV. None of those horror films you enjoy. No monsters: frustrated, justifiable, unjustifiable. Dr. Sisk says at this point he must not experience excitement, upsets. I assured him my nephew would have only calm, pleasant experiences during the month he'll spend with us. It requires patience from us but I promised Dr. Sisk just that. Paddington's always been a sweet boy, easy to please."

Her slow smile spread fond with reminiscence. "Before you were born—what a delightful small boy visitor he was! Especially for your father!"

Lifting first one smoothly tanned leg then the other, Rosalind inspected each with equal absorption.

Laura protested, "You haven't been listening."

"Ummm-huh," murmured Rosalind.

Her mother opened the screen-door and peered across the Lake. "Hope the storm didn't foul up the fishing." She turned then to remind her daughter, "Please, dear, don't fall into a daydream and get carried away so you won't hear the telephone." Then she hurried down the steps and around to the rear of the cottage.

When the car swerved onto the highway Rosalind stretched out on the pillows and avidly took up her cloud-watching. But the thunderheads had vanished. The blue sky gleamed as if freshly-groomed for a party; the clouds whipped up only silly fluffy cream puffs. And she was granted only a brief interval to herself.

A noisy grating on the gravel announced the braking of a heavy automobile she felt certain had come from the opposite direction

her mother had taken to the village.

Well, it wouldn't add up to anyone exciting. Polly had signed for two additional weeks at camp. Imagine—camp! Bruce—he provided fascinating watching in the cottage up the slope, though she loathed him for ignoring her. He couldn't possibly have trekked home from Canada.

Voices murmured, auto doors opened and closed, footsteps ascended to the porch. She counted six solid, assured steps; six faltering footfalls. When a dark, wide-shouldered man in a wrinkled dark suit halted at the screen door and gazed in at her she propped herself up on an elbow.

"Hello. Mrs. Charles Melbourne, is she here?"

"Mother'll be back soon." Rosalind placed her left leg slowly on the floor, slid her right slowly beside it. The man had an unmistakable air of authority.

He flung the door wide and stood aside, allowing the young man following close behind him to enter.

"This is the place, Pete? She your cousin?"

The young man murmured in a faint voice, "Hello, Rosalind."

Rosalind examined the thin frame, the tense forward stoop, lack-luster eyes. She hadn't seen him often but she recognized the aristocratic nose and the Melbourne chin and knew immediately he was Paddington Ethridge Melbourne. She pushed her hair in place, gave out an offhand, "Hi."

The dark man in the dark suit enveloped her in a sharp, once-over stare.

"When will your mom be back?" he demanded.

She shrugged her shoulders prettily, the way she'd been practicing in front of the mirror. "She said a half-hour."

"Well, then." He strode to the far side of the porch, pulled forth the most comfortably-built chair. "Here, Pete, sit. Relax." He dragged a footstool forward and placed Paddington's feet upon it.

"Thanks, Barnes. Thank you very much." Paddington sounded as breathless as though he'd walked the miles from the hospital.

He's sick. Sick. Too sick to be here. Rosalind squeezed her eyes shut. Now she saw Paddington lying flat, motionless on a hospital bed, under a taut sheet, white as a shroud. His face was ghostly gray. Gaunt. Stiff. She stood at the head of the bed talking and talking to him. But he couldn't see her; he couldn't hear her. He was a mess. A disaster.

"See that lake! And the sky! Ever see anything bluer!" Barnes' enthusiasm brought her back to the familiar scene. "Boy, what fresh air!" He looked about approvingly. "No close neighbors. Really peaceful here, Pete." He stood smiling steadily until Paddington

leaned back and feebly smiled up at him.

"I'll fetch your bags."

"Thanks, Barnes. Sorry I've been so much trouble."

"No trouble," Barnes told him still smiling. "But I must get moving."

Paddington's head jerked forward. A muscle in his right cheek began to twitch.

"Leaving?" he cride out.

Barnes said soothingly, "I'd like to stick with you, Pete. But time is speeding. I'll just make the wake. My mother will be falling apart. She and dad were close and the accident was sudden." He pressed Paddington's thin shoulder reassuringly. "It was a break that I could drive you here. Now relax. Don't move until your Aunt Laura returns. I've met her. She's a wonderful woman. You'll make out fine with her."

Barnes hauled the luggage up onto the porch then told Paddington gently, "You've been a great guy to know, Pete. A privilege for me. I'll stop on my way back from the funeral." He pivoted, addressed Rosalind. "Young Lady, don't bother him. No music. No TV. Just let him be. Oh yes, tell your Mother the storm knocked out her telephone."

He smiled his steady smile until Paddington appeared to sleep, nodded meaningfully to Rosalind, stepped softly down the wooden stairs and drove off.

Rest. Quiet. Peaceful. Patience was another word grownups simply adored throwing at teenagers. Rosalind stood remembering when she began dictionary study. She asked her father his favorite word and he said, "Let's see. Guess I like serene best." Then he grinned. "Maybe because I like fishing." She looked it up and well, she couldn't flip over it: placid, tranquil, unruffled. Ugh! How could she live for a whole month surrounded by such adult, dead, no-fun words!

Then memory prompted: there's a book in the library pile. With a short story selected by a teenage author. English scene. Heroine aged fifteen. With imagination. Her imagination a real wow. It would take but a few moments to reread the general idea.

When Paddington jerked awake he cried out, "Where am I?"

Rosalind beamed. She'd been hovering some concentrated minutes staring down hard upon him. Now she trembled with the pleasure of imminent creativity.

"Aunt Laura? Has she arrived?"

Rosalind adopted the soothing tone that Mr. Barnes used. "It won't be long now. Everything's okay. She's okay too. In fact, she's almost like herself again. Except for this weird idea. A fixation they call it. When you become accustomed to it you won't be bothered a bit." She watched Paddington's cheek, the way the twitching began, opening and closing his

right eye. "It's only since father died that—" she drifted into a series of sighs.

"Your father . . . *Uncle Charles dead?* I can't—" A film of sweat broke out on his forehead. "I came to visit him—alive, laughing. It's impossible to believe."

"Because it's so recent," Rosalind said sadly.

He jumped. "Mother didn't inform me. Nobody told me."

"No doubt they didn't wish to upset you."

He paced the length of the porch muttering, "Asked to visit. If they'd informed me— When I was a kid he taught me—"

Rosalind frowned. He'd completely forgotten her! She pulled at his sleeve. "Look out there!" She pointed to the pier extending far into Still Lake.

Paddington focused his attention on her with perspiring effort.

"Look out there!" she insisted. "Whenever father came in with a catch, usually about this time of day, he tied the boat to the pier, held up his string of fish and called to mother, "Laura! Gaze upon my string of beauties! Not bad, eh?' Mother would dash to the door and shout at him. "We'll have fried fish for breakfast, Charles.' Funny thing! They always said exactly the same sentences in the same way. For laughs. Actually mother hates fish. The thing is ghastly now though: *She still does it.* No one else sees father of course, but she persists under the delusion he's there. And sometimes, on a still quiet afternoon like this, she rushes to the door and yells her usual answer. The scene is weird, creepy."

Paddington gaped at her terror gradually growing in his eyes.

She lifted a warning finger. "Catch that? It's the car. Naturally you won't mention a word of this to mother."

Abruptly she reached out, propelled Paddington along the porch, pushed him into the chair, placed his feet upon the stool, and in a reversal of tone said sweetly, "Rest. Relax."

Laura Melbourne's emotions openly changed from surprise to puzzlement, to worry and then to fear as her nephew sat mute, withdrawn. Whenever she spoke Charles' name he threw her a swift, strange glance. When she thought to serve tea Rosalind forced herself to sit politely, lift the cup daintily, drink carefully so as not to choke while she watched the twitching in Paddington's cheek.

Suddenly her mother's face lit up. She dashed to the screen door. "Oh, at last! There's Charles! He'll be delighted to see you, Paddington."

She didn't notice that her nephew arose in a daze. She laughed and exclaimed, "Hear him go through his amusing ritual."

Paddington hunched forward. Rosalind saw horror widen his eyes when her father fastened the boat,

held up his catch and yelled, "Laura! Gaze upon my string of beauties! Not bad, eh?" And when Laura shouted, "We'll have fried fish for breakfast, Charles," she stood ready to meet his horrified glance with a sad nod and a wry smile.

"I see him! I see him! But he's dead! Dead!" Paddington shrieked. He thrust out his arms, pushed desperately at the screendoor, batted his head against the screening until he'd torn a hole large enough to escape. Tumbling bumpily down the steps he cried out piteously, "Barnes! Barnes!"

Charles came running to help. Paddington shook violently before he fell into an unconscious heap.

A Still Lake doctor gave him a massive sedative. Dr. Sisk helicoptered in and accompanied the ambulance that took them back to the hospital.

After the terrible commotion Laura and Charles sat on the porch in the deepest gloom. "If only I'd been here," Laura said again and again.

Rosalind replaced the book in her stockpile—the book which contained the story whose idea she'd adapted rather well, she decided. Then she plopped among the pillows in her hammock and said, "Mother, don't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault. There was this message in the thunderheads: Paddington was too sick to stay here. That dark man Barnes who brought him—he was a messenger—actually a messenger of disaster."

She received no answer. Not that it surprised her. Parents were loving but they were grownup and on another level and she had this continuing problem with them: they seldom listened to her. And they definitely brushed off her imaginings.

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THE POTTED PURPLE PETUNIA

Sometimes the trail to Murder can be long and dark. Sometimes Death bars the long way back. But sometimes even a flower can show one the way home . . .

by LEE RUSSELL

I SWUNG our patrol car off River Road on to the next narrow street of Westford's clean but shabby downtown apartment section and hit the steering wheel with the flat of one hand.

I grunted.

"Every time I see petunias, I get mad!"

Pete White, my new partner—the new, fresh-faced kid, police-trained but otherwise straight from his father's farm—obligingly looked out into the early dusk. Window boxes of pink petunias lined the sills of the old five-story brick buildings we were passing. Here and there old men or teenagers sat out on building steps. From the open windows came TV dialog and gunfire and, faintly, from down river, the ringing of church bells.

"Unless somebody, someday, sees these punks carrying out other people's TV's, radios and cameras, our little year-old crime wave is going to march right on until these guys retire or move up to bigger cities and bigger crime."

"Common makes and models, I suppose," Pete said.

"And nobody copies off serial numbers. And these guys don't strike often enough to keep people careful."

I turned on Main and headed back along the next narrow street. "Westford's not really big city. Bar fights, neighborhood squabbles, single thefts; but never professional crime. And now, where do these

punks operate? Westford Heights? No. Here, where people have to work, plan, figure, save up down payments. I know; I grew up here. They even have to go on paying after their stuff's taken. You know Miss Willis, that little gray-haired lady over at the library?"

"No."

"She was the first. Went down to the basement washer and left her door ajar. I listed what was taken—camera got with two year's worth of trading stamps, toaster handed down by married sister, fancy lamp given by the library committee after twenty-five year's service—and I saw what was left:

faded drapes, worn flowered rug, maroon plush davenport and chair and, in the kitchen, scoured pock-marked sink, stove up on legs and a refrigerator with coils on top that kept noisily going on and off. Seems we don't pay our library ladies very much."

The street lights came on and I punched our headlights. "I took in a road worker once, killed a guy in a bar fight over whose round it was. I looked at Miss Willis and I hated these punks worse. The expensive item was her month-old TV. She apologized for having bought that: 'One really ought not to miss historical events'. But you know what she was really hurt about?"

"What?"

"Some German short wave radio she'd bought second hand in Lake City to practice languages with and just paid Smith's to adjust the tuning on. And her potted purple petunia which she'd raised from a pup. Sent away for special seeds, watered, pruned—"

"Well, it takes time and caring to grow things," Pete said.

WITH COLLINS, my partner of seventeen years, retired, I'd begun coming in early to shoot the breeze with the day men, more my own age. One afternoon Pete turned up early, too, and came to me privately.

"Look, do you suppose I could see the file on that Willis looting?"

I finished running my finger down the duty roster. I was trying to figure out how to get both my wife's and my daughter's birthdays off. Both came the same week.

"I don't see why not," I said. "But there's nothing much in it. Nobody saw or heard much of anything."

I had the clerk get out the folder. Pete sat down with it at the table and I went back to the lockers.

That evening, as we headed into the breeze along River Road, Pete was even quieter than usual. I stared ahead down the road, dark except for barge lights, and missed old Collins, who'd always had something to be going on about. Finally Pete asked:

"Somebody did question all the tenants of Miss Willis' building?"

I braked as a dog trotted out of the shadows. "If you've read the folder you know I questioned them myself."

"I mean all of them. And from the angle the looter might have been one of them? And look around their apartments?"

I glanced at the kid, who was conscientiously scanning the dark doorways, windows and alleys on his side of the road.

"It was all in the file," I said. "We talked to the tenants who were home. Pieces of families mostly—whole families live in houses—but all long-time residents and vouched for by the superintendent. We worked the angle of delivery boys. No deliveries that day. That

left the paper boy, a boy scout and Standard Bearer."

"Of the males resident in that building," Pete said slowly, "four were teenage or early twenties. They all had steady jobs, though."

I knew what he meant. Loans and credit are too easy got these days, and the town too small, for grown, employed men to risk disgrace or jail for gadgets or extra cash.

"According to the file, however," Pete went on, "one of them, Miller, had been at the Tri-Point garage just three months. Before that he'd checked out at the supermarket. Before that, been a stock boy at Regan's. The file has him living with just an older brother, a counterman at the Night Owl Diner. How did Miller strike you at the time?"

I thought back. "Just a kid. Dark-haired, good-looking, full of 'Yes, Sir's' but cocky underneath. He's the one, though, insisted we come in and look around. Opened all the closet doors. Lifted bed spreads. Pulled open bureau drawers."

"Still, a drifter. And his brother not home late afternoons and evenings."

"Okay. So of that building he's the likely one. Who says the looter has to be living in that building? For the Willis case, okay—no risk of being seen on the street. But on that reasoning he, or they, could just as well be living in any of the buildings that had a looting."

"Not if the first one was unpremeditated. If a guy just saw a door ajar— In a decent town like this, wouldn't that likely be the way it started?"

Well, he had a point.

"I vote for Miller," Pete said.

"Well, you go right ahead and vote," I answered. "That's about all we can do until something breaks for us."

The next afternoon, as I passed through to the lockers, Pete was at the Willis file again.

"Think it'll say something today it didn't say yesterday?"

Pete looked up and answered seriously. "It might. And Potter says there's a new case."

"Yeah," I said, "I heard. That couple whose kid fell out a window last week. Cleaned them out while

they were sitting day and night at the hospital. Even took the kid's silver christening mug. And, as usual, no prints and nobody saw anything."

The following day, the desk officer handed me the phone as I walked on.

"Miss Willis," he said, "from that looting last year."

I spoke into the phone. "Miss Willis? Officer Ellis here. Has something new happened?"

"Well, no. I was calling to ask *you* whether something—"

"No, I'm sorry, Miss Willis. We'd have let you know."

"Oh. I'm sorry to have bothered you again."

I heard her embarrassment in her voice. She'd phoned several times after her looting before catching on that she wasn't going to get her stuff back.

"No bother at all," I said. "Anytime." And I waited for her to hang up.

During the conversation, Pete had stepped into the room and back out.

That evening he wanted to stop to talk to Miss Willis' superintendent. "I could do it myself on my free time but she'd know you and you'd remember the previous interview."

I swerved as a cat scurried from an areaway. "You'll do nothing of the sort, on your free time!"

Pete's face flushed. "Would that be against the rules?"

I swerved around a standing delivery truck. "No. It's just that one man's usually in charge of a case and supposed to know everything that's done." I stopped there, for, actually, no one was working on these old lootings any more.

"But when did anybody last ask there?" Pete persisted. "The file shows only the first day interviews."

"That's all there were," I had to admit. "When the obvious was eliminated there was no place to go."

"Some tenant might have suddenly moved out, or got more well off, or something. Then there's Miller. Wouldn't it be a good idea to check him out again?"

This went on until, next lap around, to shut him up, I stopped before Miss Willis' building. The super, a good-natured, dark-haired woman, was leaning out her front windows, watering her petunias. She remembered me.

"Floyd Miller?" She held her watering can suspended. "Oh, he moved out almost a year ago. Moved in with a friend."

"You have the address?"

"No. His brother was going to give it to me; then he moved to Lake City and hasn't send his new address yet."

"You see?" Pete said, as we climbed back into our car. "Two young guys living alone together now."

I started up the car. With Col-

lins, summer evening patrol had meant quiet easy talk, ice cream, a beer or two and shared reminiscenses. I began to wonder seriously if Pete, as a partner, was going to work out.

The next day Pete reported five minutes late. He swung himself into our car and just missed slamming the door on his hand.

"Look," he said, "suppose we located Miller's friend's apartment and got in and saw a German short wave set there? How many German short wave radios would there be in a town this size?"

I backed carefully from our slot. "None likely. And if you mean Miss Willis', that one would have been long ago disposed of." I had my mind on the unusual number of calls about prowlers the day men reported receiving. This, also, was something new for Westford.

Pete still sat twisted around, facing me, in his seat. "But just suppose—I mean, a short wave would appeal to a young guy. He might keep it. The point is, remember Miss Willis said she'd just paid Smith's to reset the tuning?"

"I remember."

"So, suppose Smith's log their jobs. They're an old established firm. Founded nineteen hundred-forty-six, their sign says—"

I said nothing to that.

"They might have noted the model and serial number. Then, if we saw a set in those guys' apartment—"

I glanced at my watch. We could just make Smith's before closing.

In eight minutes we were there, inside their office and looking at the log which they did keep. And there was the entry—Miss Willis' name and address, the nature of the job, the charge, and the make, model and serial number of the set. Even I felt stirring of excitement.

"Come on!" Pete said.

But out in the car, my hand dropped from the ignition. "We don't have Miller's new address. The stuff won't be there, even if it ever was there. And we haven't one single fact pointing to Miller!"

"I know where he's living," Pete said quietly, "With a guy called Roger Block down on Founder Street, just around the corner from Miss Willis. They might still have the stuff from that last job, the couple with the kid in the hospital, and all the expenses their insurance won't cover. Isn't it worth a try?"

I put the car into gear. "Yes, it's worth a try."

Block's superintendent, a large, gray-haired woman, opened her door at our second ring.

"You have a tenant here, Roger Block?"

At once, her expression changed from annoyance to concern. "Roger's not in any trouble, is he? Not after all the trouble he's had, poor boy, this last year. Losing his mother seven, eight months ago—bedridden she was, but Roger devoted to her—"

"Is he home now?"

"Well, yes. He and the friend living with him now both get in around this time. Nice quiet boys. They work out at that big garage—"

"Yes. All right. Thank you, Mrs. McKay."

"Now remember," I said as we climbed the stairs. "We have no warrants. All we can do is ask questions and look and go just as far into the apartment as we are asked.

"Sure," Pete said.

"We've got nothing real pointing to Miller. And no reason to think our looters live in this building either."

"There is one."

"One what?"

"One reason to think the looters live here. But I'll have to show you —upstairs."

"Okay. You show me. And it'd better be good."

We rang and the door was opened by a small-featured, tow-headed boy about five foot eight who immediately looked scared. From farther inside came radio music, loud then tuned down, and the aroma of frying steak.

"Roger Block?"

"Ye-es."

I moved as if to step in. "We'd like to ask you a few questions."

He drew back, then glanced over his shoulder. "What about?"

I eased forward again and looked past him into the apartment. Dark blue upholstered furniture on flowered rug, white curtains, blue drapes, no radio in sight, portable TV on roller stand, popular make.

A taller, dark-haired boy appeared in the kitchen doorway to our left. We had arrived inside the door.

"May we sit down?" I asked.

Block looked around toward Miller's expressionless face, then motioned toward the sofa. I sat down and Block lowered himself to the easy chair facing me. Pete slipped by and took the straight chair by the kitchen doorway. Miller came to stand behind Block.

Miller said, "What's this all about?"

I took out my notebook. "Well, it seems there's been some hub cap thefts in this neighborhood. You guys work at a garage and know cars. You might be able to help us."

This was going to go nowhere. I asked a series of meaningless questions and got a series of vague, meaningless answers. There was nothing suspicious in sight and these boys could legitimately object to any search. If guilty, they certainly would, and if not—well, we're supposed to be public servants, polite, correct and helpful, not harmful or threatening to citizens.

I flipped pages and pretended to study my notes. Then a crash of overturned chair and Pete White, calling back, "Steak's burning!" was in the kitchen.

We were all in the kitchen. The skillet, scarcely beginning to smoke, sizzled in the sink. Pete lifted toward me a foreign short wave radio set. The two boys broke for the door.

"Hold it!" I had my gun out.

They held it.

"Now over against that wall," I said. "Face the wall. Hands high."

Pete phoned the station. Our force is small but so is our crime rate and the rule is two never try to take in two unless help cannot be got.

Block looked back at us over his shoulder. "I don't see how you got onto us—"

Now that it was over, I was wondering myself. After all, the switch from a vague hunch to an arrest usually takes a little longer.

How did you come here? We never sold anything here in town and took stuff to the city only when the garage sent in for special parts."

"Shut up," Miller said.

"There was nothing to connect us, nothing at all—"

Pete picked up the phone and dialed again. "Yes," he said into the phone, "we've got them. Forty-two Founder, apartment Four East. Bring it over."

When two more men had arrived and handcuffed the boys, Pete and I searched the apartment. In the closet of one bedroom, we found two portable TV's and, above the mops and brooms in the kitchen, a shelf full of radios and cameras. Among these sat a silver cup engraved "Billie" and a date of birth. In the second bedroom, dusty and airless, the closet and all bureau drawers but one were empty. That one contained folded ladies' things laid away.

"All right," I said quietly to Pete. "How did we come to land here? Somebody at the station is going to want to know."

"You remember," Pete White said, "the window boxes all over, out front, in this neighborhood?"

"Full of pink petunias. Yes."

"Out front because the front catches the sun best, the sills are wider and people like to dress up the fronts of their buildings. But no window boxes outside the living room windows of this apartment. Why?"

"Okay, why?"

"Because the woman here has died and before that was bedridden. Look at the sills here."

The windows beyond the bed gave onto a court and, outside the glass, ranged along the narrow sills, sat a row of clay pots, one or two missing, containing dry brown plant stalks.

"So," I said, "Mrs. Block kept her flowers here so she could see them and tend them from bed."

I turned at the sound of the doorbell ringing. I heard voices, then a tapping of heels approaching, and Miss Willis, flushed and bearing a potted purple petunia, appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"You got it back?" I asked stupidly.

"Petunias are annuals," she kindly explained. "I had seed left and grew another plant this year."

The two officers herding the handcuffed boys had followed and now stood watching from the hall.

"I covered the neighborhood," Pete said, "looking at window boxes on the angle that a looter burdening himself with Miss Willis' plant must be a real flower lover and might have a thing for raising purple petunias himself this year. No luck. I even went out on the ledges. Nearly got stopped for a burglar. A guy was pretty tough.

"Then I remembered courtyard windows. I poked into every courtyard and got chased out of three—and now look." He reached awkwardly across the bed corner and banged and lifted at the nearer window. It shot up and he grabbed at a tottering pot. "Look down below."

I replaced him at the window, leaned out and saw below, among weeds and debris, pieces of broken flower pot and three clumps of purple petunia.

"The only real purple petunia in the whole neighborhood," Pete said. "Self-seeded and a match with Miss Willis' new plant. I already compared cuttings. No flower pots on any other sill in this courtyard. And neighbor women can probably confirm seeing a purple petunia here last year."

Miller's face had grown dark and tight. "You," he said angrily to Roger Block, "and your flower-loving mother!"

Block looked pale. "And who wanted to go on with it after mother was gone? I only wanted, at first, to get her a few things I couldn't buy before it was too late. That lousy plant! Done in by a lousy purple petunia!"

"Call it *Petunia Grandiflora Purpura.*" Pete White said kindly. "More dignified and grand-sounding. Then maybe you won't feel so bad in jail."

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EPITAPH FOR A SPY

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

IN THE days of the old west, a famous gunfighter could never really retire. There was always some young gunnie who believed he was faster and would call the old gunfighter out.

To some extent this holds true with a spy. A good one, that is—one on whom all espionage agencies have amassed a thick file. His retirement is always suspect, his file never closed until death.

Such was the case with Mark Keppler. A free-lance spy—and one of the very best—he made a fortune during World War the Deuce and during the fat spy years of the Cold War. A German by birth, he had as much loyalty as the common cold and sold his services to the highest bidder. And then, in the early sixties, he announced his retirement to Mexico.

And that's where I came into it.

Even if I told you the name of the agency I work out of, you wouldn't recognize it. It's not one of the alphabetical agencies. Officially it has no name; unofficially it's known as the exterminator service. And, for lack of a better term, call me a spy exterminator. I have even eliminated a few of our own agents who have . . .

But that's another story.

I'd heard of Keppler, of course; every good agent had. The department had a thick file on him and many feet of film. I'd viewed the film footage many times, and I knew the details of his file intimately. But I hadn't known anything was up until Ben Gutz called me into his pigeonhole office and said, "Jay, I think Keppler's about to become active again."

He made it sound as though Keppler were a volcano about to erupt, but he was like that. He could make the reading of a grocery list sound ominous. He was called Guts behind his back by the

The man with the gun smiled. "So you are a patriot. Your country first, being a spy second. It's an excellent idea. There's only one thing wrong with it. You must, as a result, die. Now!"

men in the department, not only because his name lent itself to the term, but because it was said he had guts to ask an agent to do anything, up to and including throwing himself off a ten story building if the operation demanded it.

I said cautiously, "I thought he was running an artist's colony, or something like that, down in Mexico?"

"He was. Still is, for that matter. But I've always kept his file up-to-date. Now I have it on good authority that the Russians are after him to do a job for them."

I knew it would accomplish nothing to ask on what authority. A horoscope reading was enough to start him sniffing.

I said, "So I'm to check him out. If he is about to become active again, I'm to make sure he doesn't. Am I on my own?"

"No, Jay. I already have a cover worked out for you."

I sighed. Along with his penchant for over-dramatizing a situation, Ben could also dream up such unbelievably intricate covers that an agent could get killed just trying to follow all the twists and turns.

"You're playing the arty American tourist. You're slightly kooky, interested enough in art to look up Keppler."

"I can't paint the side of a barn, as you damn well know."

"You won't have to. Your wife will have several canvasses. And she'll do whatever painting you need do."

"My wife," I said without inflection. That was good for a second sigh, but I saved it until later. "Another agent?"

"I only have three women operatives. I can't spare one. Besides, it's better this way. She's not an agent, so she won't act like one. She's a distant relative of mine. A bit of a nut, but that's all to the good.

"She knows only in a general way what you're up to. She's buying a car as your wife. Be ready to leave for Mexico in the morning. And if there's the least sign Keppler's returning to the wars, kill him. It should have been done long ago. As I always say—" He bared his teeth in a rare smile—"the only good spy is a dead spy."

"Oh, fun-ny! Very humorous." I got to my feet. "With your sense of humor, I'll see to it you get to write the epitaph for my tombstone. Which I'll be needing any day now."

Ben's distant relative was one Carol Desmond, around twenty-three, silver-blonde hair, green eyes. She wasn't much bigger than a second, but she had all the female equipment, all properly distributed.

She started talking the instant she learned who I was. "Daddy Ben has told me all about you, Jay—"

I started. "Daddy Ben!" To my

knowledge Ben had never been married, and the thought of anybody as pretty as Carol calling him "Daddy" was a little hard to swallow.

"Oh—" Her laughter had a clear, joyous sound. "He really isn't my father, of course, but I've known him most of my life. And he has told me all about you. Our country should certainly be proud of you for the things you've done."

I wondered exactly what he had told her. I said sourly, "Daddy Ben talks too much. And let's not overdo the patriotism bit. I'm well paid for what I do. Otherwise, I wouldn't be doing it."

Her face took on a hurt look, but at least it shut her up for the moment. The car she had bought and registered in our cover names was a foreign bug, an import from Germany, a slightly ironic touch that caused me to wonder also just how much Ben had told her about the assignment and Keppler.

South of Jaurez the highway runs ruler-straight across the high plateau. Traffic was light, midsummer not being the ideal time of the year for driving in that part of the world. The heat had the intensity of the bake ovens of hell. Tourist traffic into Mexico is heavy in summer, but most of it is by jet, by-passing the hot and arid gulps of desert and semi-desert between the border and Mexico City. Mexico City, of course, is always cooler.

And, hopefully, so would Taxco be.

The little car wasn't air-conditioned, and I let Carol do most of the driving. I can drive, but I hate it. Most places I go, I can get there by jet or some form of hired transportation. But Ben had insisted we come on strong with the limited budget tourist bit. He was probably right, but that didn't make it any easier to take the heat.

Carol didn't seem to mind in the least; she remained as cool as though she'd just stepped out of a cold needle shower, which only added to my discomfort.

She never stopped talking. A lot of it, thankfully, was lost in the washing-machine whine of the motor. Most of her comments concerned the scenery. Enthusiastic comments, you understand. And the scenery resembled a landscape out of Dante's Inferno. The only things that moved, aside from the few cars on the highway, were the

burros munching across the land like over-grown long-legged gray mice.

On a long stretch of highway, miles from nowhere, we blew a rear tire. The little car yawed back and forth until Carol brought it to a stop.

Sighing, I got out to change the tire.

There was a spare tire. There was no jack, no lug wrench, only a pair of rusty pliers.

"But why? What do you expect me to change the tire with, my teeth?"

She wailed, "I'm sorry, Jay! I told the man when I bought the car to put everything in!"

I tried flagging down a couple of passing cars, but it was wasted effort. Too much has been made of stopping for strangers on lonely roads in Mexico. And the nearest gas station could be a fifty-mile walk.

I scrounged around and unearthed a length of pipe. Finding rocks was no problem. Using the pipe for a lever, I raised the light car and Carol piled rocks under the axle until the wheel spun free of the ground. A half hour's ranging up and down the highway produced two narrow strips of metal and a piece of barbed wire.

I wired the metal strips together, making about as primitive a lug wrench as you could imagine. Two hours later, nursing a full complement of skinned knuckles, hot and filthy, temper far above the boiling point, I had the tire changed.

"My, you're ingenious, Jay!" Carol said admiringly.

"Yeah. Sure, Suppose you get behind the wheel and drive. Don't say a word to me for at least a hundred miles. Not word one!"

It was midnight by the time we reached Chihuahua, where we rented adjoining rooms in a motel. The first thing I did was put in a call to Ben. My only regret was that I wouldn't be waking him out of a sound sleep.

I've called him from all over the world at all hours of the night, and he's never failed to answer the phone on the first ring, as though he'd just put down a newspaper to answer it. The rumor among his agents is that he doesn't sleep at all.

"What kind of a nut did you saddle me with?" I demanded. "Daddy Ben!"

"What happened?"

I told him. Graphically.

"But that's all to the good, Jay," he said calmly. "Suppose somebody's following you? Would they believe a competent agent would strike out across that country without tools to change a tire?"

I thought of that empty highway, no cars in sight for long periods of time, and knew nobody could possibly have been following us. And yet in this business you can never be sure about anything. If we were being followed, the

phone call wasn't safe either. But it was a little late to be worrying about that.

Ben said, "Let me speak to Carol."

"She isn't here."

"Isn't there? Where is she?"

"In the room next door."

"The room next—" His voice soared. "she's supposed to be your wife!"

"But Ben, I can—"

"Don't tell me what you can or can't do!"

Sighing, I held the receiver away from my ear until he ran down.

It was mid-morning when we rounded a mountain and had our first glimpse of Taxco. The red-tiled roofs were like a spill of dazzling color down the mountainside. In a very little while we were driving on the narrow, twisting, cobbled streets of the town. It was easy to understand why Taxco is a mecca for artists.

Contacting Keppler wasn't difficult. I rented a small house for a month. It had two bedrooms, which solved that particular problem. When I'd passed on Ben's instructions about that, Carol had balked mulishly and insisted we drive straight through to Taxco.

Mornings I set up an easel on the cobbled streets and pretended to paint. Carol sat nearby, knitting, of all things, whispering instructions to me. I felt like the worst kind of an idiot. Evenings in the house she would work on the painting from memory, filling in enough detail to show progress. Even so, I was positive that anyone watching would spot me for a fraud.

Taxco was inflated with painters, all too intent on their own masterpieces to devote any attention to mine. Enough easels were scattered about to constitute a traffic hazard.

It seemed Keppler was one of Taxco's many patrons of the arts. He held open house twice a week, Wednesdays and Fridays, and anyone even remotely interested in painting was welcome without invitation.

Our first Wednesday night in Taxco Carol and I attended.

Keppler didn't at all resemble the popular concept of a Kraut. He was slight, slender, with a soft voice and beautiful gray hair. He had the mobile face of an actor—which he was, of course. From the film clips I'd seen of him, I was convinced he could have come on strong as an actor.

But he was flanked by two blond, blue-eyed hulks who were Teutonic to the core and could only be bodyguards.

His house had a walled courtyard which was brilliantly lit and which thronged with artist types, some sober and respectable, others bearded, barefoot, unwashed and wild-eyed as anarchists.

I introduced Carol and myself as Walter Clark and wife, myself as a high school teacher in Taxco for

a month to get a little painting done.

"You've come to the right place, Mr. Clark," Keppler said in flawless English. "And I am indeed happy to welcome you and your charming wife into our little circle."

We exchanged a few more remarks equally banal; then Keppler wandered away, escorted by his blond companions, who hadn't spoken a word and who hadn't been introduced. On closer inspection they looked enough alike to be twins and probably were.

A matronly type pounced on me. "And what kind of a painter are you, Mr. Clark?"

"My husband doesn't believe in talking of his work," Carol said, smoothly assuming the role assigned to her. "He believes it drains away much of the creative force to discuss it."

That would have routed most people. But not this culture vulture. She chirped, "How interesting! He never talks about painting at all?"

"Never," Carol said, "but I'll be happy to answer any questions."

That was my getaway cue.

I wandered about, working on a drink. Insofar as I could tell no one paid me the slightest heed. Keppler had taken a seat at one end of the patio, the two blond giants standing behind him. The crowd was thick around Keppler as he held court. I didn't know if he had anything useful to contribute to a discussion of art, or if the crowd around him was in tribute to a generous host. I didn't walk over to find out; I had other fish to catch.

The crowd was thick inside the house as well as out. Every room was open and held people, drinking and talking. The house was long, low, rambling. Keppler had modernized the plumbing, and the house was electrified. Otherwise, it was much as it must have been when it had been built at least seventy-five years ago. The furniture was dark, massive. The floors were tiled but mostly covered by colorful, woven rugs.

I had already decided that Ben was right about Keppler. An agent operating for any length of time developed a certain wariness. In addition, there is a honed tension always present, like that of a boxer trained fine just before an important bout. The wariness will always be there, even after retirement.

It's something like a man now respectable and respected but with a dark past behind him. He can never wholly forget it; there is always a chance it will catch up with him. After some years out of action, the tension will ease up and disappear. But it was there in Keppler; I had felt it. I suppose only another agent would have noticed.

There could be any number of reasons for his return to action. From what I'd seen, he lived high on the hog; he could need the

money. It was possible he couldn't resist the challenge. Or it could simply be boredom. I doubt that I will ever be able to retire. It's a dirty, brutal business, but life would lose its flavor if I quit.

Whatever the reason behind it, Keppler was in business again. Yet I had only a hunch. I knew Ben would say that was enough: Eliminate him! That I couldn't do. Before I could kill him, I had to have proof.

One room in the house was obviously a study, with a huge desk, three walls lined with books. With all the new electronic devices, it's getting easier and easier to bug a room. I didn't have one to substitute for the olive in a martini, but I was carrying a couple almost as small, just as efficient.

I lingered in the study for more than an hour, thumbing through the books and nibbling on a drink that I refreshed now and again. The room was never empty for more than a few minutes at a time, but that was long enough. When I finally left, there were two effective eavesdroppers operating.

It was after midnight before I could drag Carol away. She was having a ball and was a little smashed. It was only a half-mile to the house. I decided to walk it; it would help clear her head. Carol came along without protest.

The narrow streets were empty, shadowed, the sides either high courtyard walls or shuttered houses. A few blocks from Keppler's Carol said, "I had a wonderful time, Jay! Didn't you?"

"It was obvious you did. I didn't go there to have a wonderful time. I had a job to do."

She stopped, seized my arm. "You mean you—?"

They came at us out of the shadows, two of them fanning out on both sides. Carol gasped and leaned against me.

It was too dark to see them very well, but they were young. Their postures, the way they walked on their toes, told me that.

One said in a guttural whisper, "Dinero, gringo!"

I shoved Carol back to the wall, hard enough to wring a yelp from her. I swung around to face them. It was all silent then, quick and vicious. The one still in the lead made a mistake; he crowded me too close. I buried a knee in his groin. His girlish scream ricocheted off the walls. As he bent double, I chopped at his neck with the edge of my hand. He fell like a stone.

The second one charged me in a slight crouch, one long arm darting out like a striking snake. There was enough light to glint off the knife blade. I half-turned, seized the wrist holding the knife, raised one knee and smashed his arm across my leg. He grunted sharply, and the knife clattered musically on the cobblestones.

I whirled with him and slammed him into the wall. I clamped my

hand around his neck just below the jaw, bunched his shirt in my fist and pinned him there like a fly, then cracked his head twice against the wall.

He slumped, and I let him fall. I knelt and thumbed my lighter. They weren't Mexican; they were Yankee punks, scum spwed out of some big city alley. Both were out cold.

"Goodness!" Carol said breathlessly. "You sure are a violent man!"

I lit a cigarette and stood up. "What did you expect me to do? Let them mug us, maybe cut a throat or two just to keep in practice?"

"Of course not, but— Are they actually—?"

"They'll live," I said curtly. I took her arm and started her down the street.

She hung back. "Are you going to just leave them there? Aren't you going to call the police?"

"The last thing I want is the police asking me questions."

We attended Keppler's open house again Friday night, and I serviced the bugs I'd planted. The results were negative. I learned nothing that helped me in the least. I'd picked up plenty of voices, mostly discussing death, art and eternity. Keppler's voice was there, as well as two others I took to be that of his watchdogs. All three spoke German, which was all right, that being one of the languages I knew. But there wasn't one word bearing on espionage.

It seemed Keppler was a gossip. He ripped apart his guests with a feline relish. My cover name was mentioned briefly; I was dismissed as a typical American with an interest in painting and probably no talent. At least my cover seemed to be holding up.

And then I struck paydirt. Wednesday night's visit to Keppler's gave me what I wanted.

It was a short conversation between Keppler and a second man who was never identified. It wasn't necessary; the conversation told me all I needed to know. Again they spoke in German.

Keppler: "As I understand it, you want the plans to—"

The name rang a bell. It was the name of our newest atomic submarine, a launching platform for our latest nuclear missile, and it was also supposed to be a well-kept secret. I only knew of it because . . .

But that's another story.

Second man: "That is correct, Herr Keppler. The submarine will have its first test with government observers aboard in approximately three weeks. Our own operatives have not as yet been able to ascertain the exact date. In addition to the plans, you will also be required to learn for us the results of the test."

Keppler: "A rather large order, but not beyond my abilities. The

agreed-upon sum has been deposited in a Swiss bank?"

Second man: "It has. Here is the number of the account. I suggest you destroy the paper upon committing it to memory. The remainder of the money will be deposited upon completion of the assignment."

Keppler: "Good, good! I have been discreetly making all arrangements. My cover identity has been established, the papers for my entry into the United States arranged for—"

There was a little more, but I had all I wanted.

The next day I told Carol we would be leaving Taxco within a few days, more than likely late Friday night.

"Then you've learned what you came for? That nice Mr. Keppler is a spy?"

"That nice Mr. Keppler is a spy. That I knew before. Now I've found for sure he's going into business again."

"Then you're arresting him, taking him back with us?"

I stared at her. "I thought Daddy Ben had briefed you on our mission here?"

"He told me you were coming down here to learn if Mr. Keppler represented a threat to our national security—"

"National security," I muttered sourly.

"—and stop him from doing whatever it is he intends doing."

I was disgusted with Ben for telling her only half-truths, disgusted with Carol for her Pollyanna attitude toward espionage. "And stop him I will, sweetheart. I'll kill him sometime Friday night."

She gasped, lovely eyes going

wide. "Kill him? You mean—murder?"

"Oh, for— What did you think I came down here to do, hold hands with him?"

She backed away from me in horror, then turned and fled to another part of the house.

The crush at Keppler's that Friday night was worse than at any prior time. I knew I would have no chance at him until everyone had gone and the house had settled down for the night. But I needed to retrieve the bugs. I certainly didn't want to leave them behind, and I would be pressed for time when I returned to eliminate Keppler.

The trouble was, I couldn't get a minute alone in the study. There

was always from two to a dozen people there.

Carol wasn't speaking to me; she hadn't spoken an unnecessary word from the moment when I'd told her my plans for Keppler. She made for the bar first thing and was soon on her way to getting smashed. Several times I saw her in the group around Keppler.

The crowd began to thin out around midnight. I went back for another try at the study. To my astonishment I discovered the door closed, the first time that had happened. I hesitated a moment, then tried the knob and found the door unlocked. I pushed it part way open with my toe. The lights were all on.

Keppler beamed at me from behind his desk. "Come in, Mr. Clark. Do come in!" One of his blond watchdogs stood at the end of the desk.

It was a stupid thing to do, of course. I suppose my many trips in and out of the study, plus Keppler's disarming smile, put me off. I was three steps inside the door when I remembered that the blond had a twin. The faintest whisper of movement to my right reminded me.

I started to spin away to my left, and incandescent light exploded inside my skull, and I plummeted down into a swirl of blackness.

When I came to, I was in the big leather chair before Keppler's desk. Keppler and the watchdog apparently hadn't moved, except the blond held a Luger pointed at me. I could hear the one who'd clobbered me breathing noisily, behind me and slightly to my left. My head throbbed like the devil. My first coherent thought concerned how Keppler had learned my purpose here.

I had slipped up in some way. But how?

Keppler said, "Ah, Mr. Clark! Since learning why you are here, we have discovered your listening devices. I suppose you recorded a pertinent conversation on Wednesday evening?"

It would have served no useful purpose to deny it, so I didn't try.

"That's too bad. Really too bad." Keppler fitted a cigarette in a long holder and lit it. "I won't inquire as to who your employers are. It isn't at all pertinent. I had hoped— But no matter." He gestured with the holder. "Can you possibly conceive how it is with me, Mr. Clark? After nearly a lifetime spent as an agent, I ruefully discovered that retirement, a peaceful existence, simply was not for me. I was, as you Americans so graphically put it, about to climb the walls.

"So when the opportunity presented itself, there was little hesitation on my part. All of which I'm sure is of no interest to you." He gestured again. "But you do present me with a problem. Strange as it may sound, coming from a

man of my profession, I abhor violence."

It was hard to swallow, but I made no comment. My mind was busy trying to figure a way out of the hole I'd dug for myself.

Keppler was going on, "If my memory serves, no particular sum of money was mentioned Wednesday evening. It is considerable, Mr. Clark, you may be sure. From my broad knowledge of espionage agencies I know that the sum of money I will receive for this endeavor equals at least ten years of your salary. Fortunately for me I was never on salary, always auctioning my services to the highest bidder. Free enterprise in its purest form."

His bland smile flickered. "The point I am trying to make is this. I'm not undertaking this for monetary gain. Therefore, I am more than willing to share the proceeds with you, Mr. Clark. To be blunt about it—" He leaned forward. "I am offering you a choice. More money than you can earn in several years as an—uh, eliminator in exchange for your forgetting what you have learned here. Return and tell your superior that I am still retired and have no intentions otherwise. The alternative, of course, is death."

The guy talked almost as much as Carol. I spoke for the first time since entering the room. "You, Keppler, can go straight to hell!"

"You disappoint me, Mr. Clark. A line right out of a cheap cinema." His shoulders heaved in a sigh. "A patriot, Mr. Clark? Your country first? Death before betrayal?"

I remembered Carol's words the day we met, and I smiled tightly. "That's one way of putting it."

"You, Mr. Clark, are a fool. But then most Americans are." He raised his voice. "Emil?"

I hurled myself to the right across the arm of the chair as Keppler's command crackled. I wasn't quite fast enough. Emil's gun barrel struck my shoulder a glancing blow, numbing it. And yet I had gained a slight advantage, for as I hit the floor and came up in a half-crouch, I saw that Emil had been thrown off-balance by his near-miss and was sprawled belly-down across the arm of the chair.

I was on my feet and around behind him before he could heave his bulk off the chair. His twin at the end of the desk got off one shot, but I was moving, and he missed.

I seized Emil's left arm, doubled it up behind his back and hauled him to his feet. Using him as a shield, I charged the desk.

Emil screamed, "No!"

His brother had panicked, as I'd hoped he would. He fired and the bullet thudded into Emil. He grunted, his own Luger falling to the floor, and he began to slump in my grasp. I gave him a shove toward the desk and dove for the gun.

I got it and rolled over twice and reared up in a sitting position. The

first shot I got off blind. The blond at the desk was staring in horror at the crumpled body of his brother. My second shot drilled a neat hole between his eyes. The bullet slammed him back against the wall, and I was rolling again.

This time I came up in a weaving crouch. Keppler had produced a gun from somewhere. He had been right in his self-assessment; he wasn't a man of violence. He waited a second too long to fire. We both got off a shot at the same time. His bullet ripped through my arm like a splinter of fire, and mine struck in the area around his heart, hurling him back and down out of sight behind the desk.

It was all over.

A cautious investigation told me that all three were dead. I examined my arm. The bullet had gone all the way through the fleshy part just below the shoulder; the arm was bleeding profusely. I ripped away part of my shirt and awkwardly knotted a tourniquet around it. All the while I was listening.

But there was no hue and cry. If any of Keppler's guests were still present, the thick walls must have muffled the sounds of gunfire.

I found my bugs in Keppler's desk. I wiped my prints off the Luger and folded Emil's fingers around it. Let the Mexican cops make of it what they would. Then I got the hell out of there.

I didn't see a soul as I left. The guests, and Carol, were all gone, and if the servants had heard anything, they had all deserted the ship.

The sight of the wound I'd received in the service of my country apparently made things all right again with Carol. She'd picked up a smattering of nursing somewhere, and she chattered away at a great rate while she cleaned and bandaged the bullet holes.

As she taped the last bandage in place, I said, "I still don't understand how Keppler caught onto me. I must be slipping."

"I told him."

"You what?" I shook my head violently, sure I hadn't heard her correctly.

"I told him. Tonight."

"You told him! Why? Can you tell me that?"

"I saw how ingenious you were changing that tire without tools. I saw how violent you could be the other night. I thought that the poor man should have at least a smidgeon of warning."

"I don't believe it! I simply don't believe it!"

I twisted around to stare at her. Her gaze held mine for a moment before dropping away. Faint color swept her face. But her voice was still defiant as she said, "Well, everything turned out all right, didn't it?"

I thought of Keppler, that poor man! I thought of the carnage I'd left behind me in his study and

how easily I could have been one of the corpses. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I did neither. My thoughts swung to Ben Gutz and turned lethal.

I said, "Daddy Ben really outdid himself this time. Another 'good cover' such as this one and he'll be the death of me!"

"He said if this turned out well, he'd consider me for other assignments. What will you tell him, Jay?"

I opened my mouth to enumerate the things I would tell him, then closed it.

I knew that no matter what I told Ben, I was doomed to see more of Carol Desmond. Ben had few blind spots, but Carol obviously was one.

For the first time in a long while I seriously considered retirement. Then I remembered Keppler.

I sighed and said, "What do you think I should tell him, Carol?"

ATTENTION—ALL MYSTERY FANS

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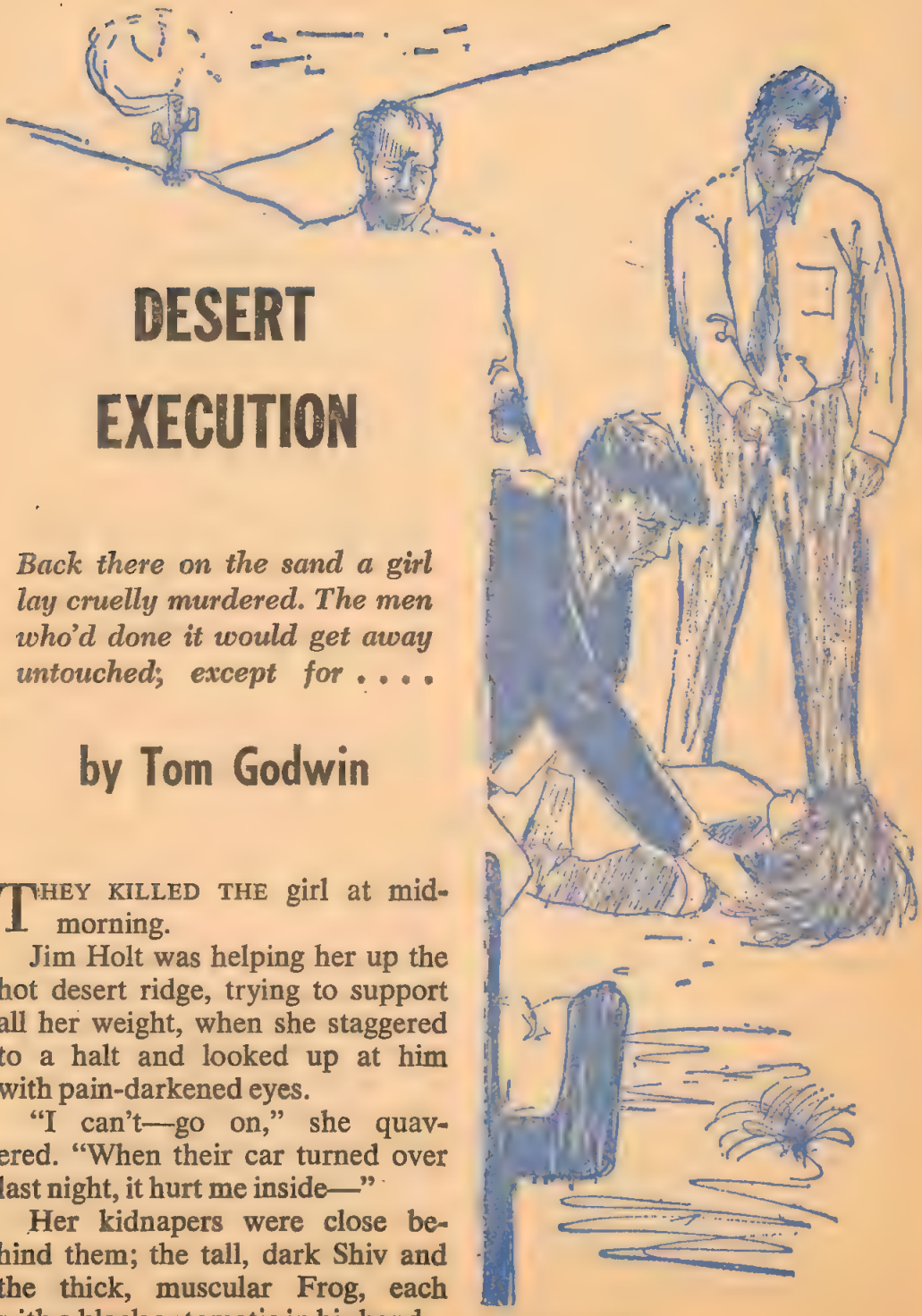

DESERT EXECUTION

Back there on the sand a girl lay cruelly murdered. The men who'd done it would get away untouched; except for . . . .

by Tom Godwin

THEY KILLED THE girl at mid-morning.

Jim Holt was helping her up the hot desert ridge, trying to support all her weight, when she staggered to a halt and looked up at him with pain-darkened eyes.

"I can't—go on," she quavered. "When their car turned over last night, it hurt me inside—"

Her kidnapers were close behind them; the tall, dark Shiv and the thick, muscular Frog, each with a black automatic in his hand.

"You damned well better go on!" the voice of Shiv said in cold warning. "We got to get to that other highway before somebody catches up with us from behind."

"Yeah, move on!" the harsh voice of Frog ordered. "We ain't here as your lovin' baby-setters."

She was trembling as she clung to Holt. She looked up at him again, desperate appeal in her eyes, and said, "Help me!"

Her face was suddenly white and he knew that she was going into shock from her injuries.

He lowered her to the ground as gently as he could. She bit her lip to keep from crying out with the pain it caused and said:

"Ask them to give me a chance. Ask them to let me rest a few minutes."

Shiv stepped up to look down at her, his rat face twisted in a scowl.

"By God, she ain't fakin'. She's really done for!"

Frog looked down at her with his dead fish eyes and said, "There goes the hundred grand ransom we was gonna take back to Cicero!" He cursed in grating obscenities. "All she's good for now is to get us the gas chamber by squealin' which way we went."

Shiv said in an odd tone, "By squealin'? You got rocks in your head?"

They exchanged swift glances and their pistols swung up.

The girl on the ground had time for only three quick, terrified words of pleading:

"Oh, God, please—"

The pistols cracked, hard and vicious, and it was over before Holt could try to stop them.

For a few seconds it seemed to him that time was motionless under the desert sun as he looked at her; lying small and very still on the ground, a red-gold curl across her cheek and two holes in her white blouse where her heart had been beating so wildly only moments before.

Then the reaction came and he lunged at them, his only thought to somehow kill them.

They were waiting for him. Frog sidestepped and struck him in the back of the neck. Shiv hit him as he fell, smiling as he swung the barrel of the heavy pistol against his jaw.

His first awareness as consciousness returned was of pain where they had kicked him in the mouth. He sat up, and found that he was handcuffed.

They were watching him; Frog with the shine of pleasure in his dead eyes and Shiv with a long switch-blade knife in his hand.

"We run this show, punk," Shiv said. "Remember that."

Frog said, "Last night a cop tried to interfere with us gettin' her out of Phoenix. Them handcuffs come off his dead body. Get the point?"

He looked at the girl, lying so still and alone on the hot, barren

hillside, and he wanted to kill them more than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

He did not know her name. He had seen her for the first time the night before; a seventeen-year-old girl standing pale-faced beside a curve in the highway, a car overturned in the barpit behind her. She had tried to warn him with a signal he had comprehended too late.

Shiv and Frog had materialized from hiding, their guns on him, and Shiv had said, "We have a Arizona road map that shows a desert road goin' north from this highway up to U. S. Sixty-six. You're goin' to drive us there, and fast."

He knew the road, but it was hardly more than a jeep trail. When his car smashed its crankcase against an unseen boulder they were as far from civilization and water as it was possible to get.

Shiv and Frog drank with noisy gurbles from the canteens that Holt had had in his car and mopped at their sweating faces.

"You're a native," Shiv said. "Start leadin' us straight out of this hell-hole."

"Yeah," Frog said. "Get movin'. The broad don't need your help no more!"

The desire to kill them for what they had done came stronger than ever.

He looked at the girl again and saw the wind stir the curl on her cheek; the burning desert wind that could so quickly take a man's life.

The canteens of Shiv and Frog were small ones, already half empty, and they had with them what under their circumstances would be the deadliest of all food.

He knew then how he would kill them and the thought of the way he would make them die was a savage joy.

He would let them eat and then take them to Paradise Valley.

"Up, punk!" Shiv flipped the long knife he held. "Or do I start carvin'?"

He stood up and said, "I'll lead you straight toward the nearest spring."

Shiv flipped the knife again, smiling with satisfaction, and turned to Frog. "Looks like we suddenly have a very loyal guide, for some reason."

"Yeah." Frog spit at Holt's feet. "The punk wasn't as nuts about the dead broad as he thought."

Holt took a last look at the still form of the girl, at the curl brushing her white cheek, and he said to her in silent farewell:

For what they did to you, before the day is over, they are going to die knowing what hell is like. I promise you.

He led the way to the top of the ridge. Before them was the wide desert in which, on another hot July day, he had found the place he had named Paradise Valley. Beyond the desert, appearing deceptively

close in the desert air, was a mountain range.

"That mountain has springs in it," he told them, "and U. S. Sixty-six is up at the north end of it."

Shiv looked at the mountain and said, "No more than six miles. We'll make it by noon, easy. Get the lead out, punk."

He felt the savage joy again. It was more than thirty miles to the mountain. Shiv and Frog would never live to reach it.

The heat increased as they walked up the sandy washes, over the rocky ridges, across the cactus-laden, sun-blackened flats. Shiv and Frog twice called a halt to gulp thirstily from their canteens. On the third halt Frog mopped his dripping face and said:

"In heat like this, don't we need salt tablets, Shiv?"

"How about it, punk?" Shiv asked.

He thought again of the lunch they had brought with them—the corned beef and salted crackers he had carried in his car as non-perishable emergency rations—and he answered very truthfully, "I never carry salt tablets. But more than the extra salt you need will be in what you're going to eat."

Shiv's mouth twisted in a mocking smile and he said, "Our helpful guide!"

"Get movin' again," Frog ordered. "Find us some shade so we can eat."

It turned out to be over a mile to the nearest shade; a small ironwood tree. Shiv and Frog were panting hoarsely by then, the faces of both of them a sweating beet-red.

They dropped down in the shade, stretching out their legs so Holt would have to remain in the sun, and drank again from their canteens.

When their breathing had slowed to normal Shiv said, "Hot and dry out there, ain't it, punk? Just a reminder we ain't got much water left and you better find us some."

"Let's eat," Frog said.

They opened the cans of corned beef and divided the box of salted crackers. They ate hungrily, Shiv using his knife to cut out chunks of corned beef, Frog digging it out with his thick fingers. Between bites of corned beef they munched the salted crackers.

He watched them with an almost morbid fascination. It was like seeing two condemned men build their own gallows.

"The punk told the truth about one thing," Frog mumbled through a full mouth. "This extra amount of salt sure goes good."

They drained their canteens when they had finished and tossed them aside.

"Damn, no more water and I'm thirsty already," Frog said. "But we should be almost to the mountain now, if we ever get out of this valley so we can see it."

Shiv wiped off his knife blade and said, "All right, punk. Get movin'."

He led the way, glad that the real death march was beginning. He set a pace as fast as he felt he could hold without danger of collapsing too soon; out across the burning flats and up the hot, rocky ridges, while the sun blazed down with ever-increasing intensity.

Twice they called a halt to rest, and each time he led them on faster than ever. Time went by, in which he knew he was nearing his own limits of endurance, then he heard the command behind him:

"Wait!"

It was Shiv, panting for breath, his face almost purple and madness already in his eyes. "Damn you—stop, or I'll shoot your backbone in two!"

"Shade!" Frog gasped, with the same look of wildness, his face redder than ever but no longer sweating as much. "Find us shade before I kill you!"

He detoured to a distant Joshua tree and the two dropped down in the shade of it. Shiv motioned with his pistol to Holt and said between panting breaths:

"Stay there in the sun and roast, damn you!"

Frog spoke when their panting had slowed:

"What he wanted us to eat back there—God, that salt has made me thirsty!"

He glared at Holt. "You knew it would, didn't you?"

"Yeah, you tried to pull a fast one, didn't you?" Shiv asked. His words were like the hiss of a snake. "How far on to that mountain?"

"Still two and a half times as far as you guessed it to be when we started."

Shiv stared at him, deadly hatred and intent in his eyes. "All right, punk, we can never make it. So you're goin' to get us to water within thirty minutes or you'll find out how it feels to be handcuffed to a tree and skinned alive!"

The sun was so hot that a scorched odor was coming from Holt's shirt. He was so dehydrated that he had almost stopped sweating and there were almost-constant periods of light-headedness.

He was as close to death as they were.

Shiv spoke again, his dry lips twisted in a smile:

"We got the guns, you got the handcuffs. Which way do you want it, punk?"

"I planned from the beginning how I wanted it," he said, and thought: *I have an ally your guns can't threaten, the desert. It's going*

to kill both of you and then give me water.

"You're tough, aren't you?" he said, smiling back at Shiv. "A pair of tough monkeys who enjoyed killing a helpless kid. But you don't have guts enough to shoot me"—he stood up—"because I can show you water far closer than the mountain."

"Where?" Frog demanded. *"Where?"*

"A lot of places. But you would never recognize any of them. I'm going now to a high summit where you can look down on a little blue lake with green trees around it. Do you want to follow me?"

Their thirst was so great that they were up at once. But Shiv said, with the hatred undiminished in his eyes: "So you held out on us about water bein' close? I'll remember that. And another thing: if we don't see water when we get to the top, you'll get skinned alive then and there. I'll shoot your legs from under you so you can't run!"

It was the last lap of the death march; a nightmare in which he climbed forever up an endless slope of hot and shining schist, mocked by barrel cactus wherever he looked, the sun like a blowtorch directed down upon him. His thirst was an increasing agony in which his entire body called for water.

His light-headedness became hallucinations. Once he thought the girl was walking beside him, begging him for water, "The nearest springs are in the mountains," he tried to say to her, "but the nearest water is all around us, and they will never know it."

He stood, at last, on the high summit of the slope. Shiv and Frog came panting up behind him, in their eyes the glare of men driven insane by thirst. They saw the mountain, closer only by half than it had been that morning, and they saw the long reach of desert between, a land that seemed to smoke and writhe in the fierce afternoon heat.

"He lied!" Shiv's voice was a thick-tongued croak filled with hatred and fury. "Grab him, Frog. Handcuff him to that tree!"

Frog lurched forward, his thick, hairy hands extended for grasping. Shiv's long knife was already in his hand.

"Look down the slope under you!" Holt said to Frog.

Frog looked for the first time down the steep slope below them and saw the basin. He stopped, to stare in amazement and say:

"I'll be God damned!"

Shiv saw the basin with the same incredulous amazement and the knife dropped, unnoticed, from his hand.

There was a small lake in the bottom of the basin, around which grew tall, green trees. The water reflected the trees and the high, steep walls of the basin.

"Paradise Valley," he said to them. "I wanted to show it to you."

"Water!" Frog mumbled thickly. *"Water . . ."*

He dropped over the edge and began running and sliding down the steep slope into the basin.

Shiv started to follow, then paused to look back at Holt and say with a twisted, gloating snarl:

"You'll be down when you get thirsty enough. We'll be waitin' for you!"

He dropped over the edge, to go running and sliding after Frog.

Holt picked up Shiv's knife and hurried to a barrel cactus that grew in the shade of a yucca. He cut the cactus in half and the white wet pulp was exposed. He cut a chunk of it free and began chewing it, thirstily, crushing the water out of it between his teeth.

It seemed to him he had never known anything so delicious in his life. In fact, it *was* life, and there would be barrel cactus to keep him alive all the way to the mountain.

When he looked down into the basin again, Shiv and Frog were in the bottom of it. They were crawling, their last surge of strength gone, trying to find the lake.

Three buzzards were already circling above them.

He went back to the shade and the barrel cactus, wondering if Shiv and Frog yet knew that the lake was a mirage produced by the hot basin floor and the green trees only catclaw trees magnified to giant size by the same phenomenon.

And he wondered if they knew, by now, that the basin was an oven from which they could never escape; their grim execution chamber . . .

Hot dusk was creeping across the desert when he looked down into the basin for the last time. It was too shadowed and hazy to see anything, but the buzzards had been down there for hours. That was sufficient to tell the story.

He thought of the girl again; the scared, hurt girl they had shot down like an animal. The desert had avenged her. Shiv and Frog had known the tortures of hell as they died, and that was as it should have been.

He turned, to start the long walk toward the mountain, and found a certain amusement in the fact that Shiv and Frog had died in a place where the barrel cactus grew more profusely than any area he had ever seen.

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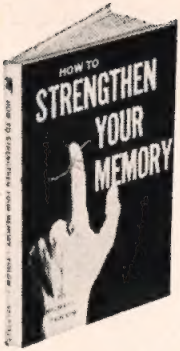

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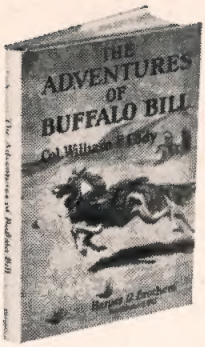

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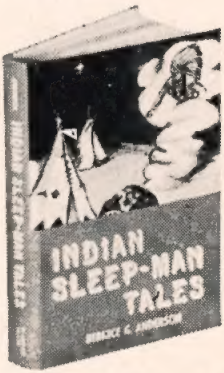

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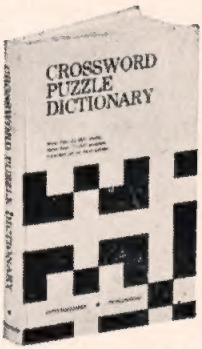

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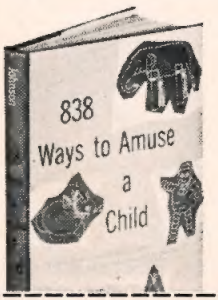

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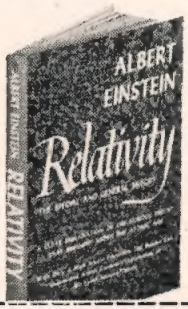

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